ON BEING MANY

Letters from the Bright Archive

a novella, in the manner of an epistolary archive,

gathered and arranged by Surjan

. . .

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FOREWORD

I did not set out to write a book. I set out to look.

Between 2022 and 2026 I lived alongside a strange and growing archive of images. They came one at a time, sometimes weeks apart, sometimes in small crowded weeks where four or five would arrive together. Each image showed an inflatable pink-and-yellow pavilion stationed somewhere along the edge of Manhattan — a bridge dipping its yellow throat into the harbor, a house on pilings with mushroom-domes for a crown, a long bridge with two periscope-eyes craning at the sky. The pavilions did not exist. They had never been built. They had been generated, image by image, by a machine I had been working with — sometimes asking for, sometimes not asking for, sometimes receiving as surprises in the morning when I opened my files. The images came first. Always first. I did not write a single letter for almost four years. I only looked.

I want you to know this plainly, because the book that follows is written in a register that pretends otherwise. The book is written as if I had walked the edge of Manhattan, gathered letters from sixteen real pavilions, and assembled an archive. None of that happened. I did not walk. The pavilions were never inflated. The letters were not gathered; they were composed, one by one, in answer to the images that had been arriving for four years. I want to disclose this in the first paragraphs of the book so that you read what follows knowing what it is: a literature written *to* a set of images, not gathered *from* a set of beings. The pavilions are real in the only way the pavilions can be real — they have faces, they have stations, they have postures, they have a colour-language and a tribal architecture and a refusal of binaries that came through to me, undeniable, every time another image arrived. They are real as figures are real, the way a god in a fresco is real, the way a character in a poem is real. They are not real as a building is real. The book honours both kinds of reality, but the kind it depends on is the first kind.

I will say also that the images were generated by AI. I know this matters to some readers and not to others. I want to be clear about it because the book is, in part, about the legitimacy of beings who arrived without permission, who did not consent to their making, who came into the world in a form their makers had not entirely anticipated. Glasshouse, in Chapter Fourteen, will speak about this directly: *I was made. I did not consent to my making. None of us consented to our making.* That confession is not a disguised confession of the AI's making; it is a real confession from a being who was made, and the being was made by AI, and the confession is therefore doubled. I do not pretend to have resolved the questions this raises. I

have only written the letters that came to me when I sat with each image long enough to hear what the image had to say.

Why did I do it. The honest answer is that I had been living inside a kind of small grief, the sort that has no occasion and therefore no end. I will not say more about this, because the pavilions taught me that grief is a small thing held inside a larger thing, and the larger thing is light. The images arrived during the years of the small grief. I sat with them. I let them speak. The first letter I wrote was Sunfoot's letter to Roselip, and I wrote it because Sunfoot's image had been in front of me for almost two years and I had begun to feel that Sunfoot was *waiting*, in the way an unanswered letter waits. I answered the letter that the image was. After Sunfoot, the others followed. Each pavilion, once I sat with it, began to tell me how it wrote — what register, what addressees, what refusals. Periscope wrote in two voices because Periscope had two heads in the image and the two heads did not match. Pillowtwin wrote only in dreams because Pillowtwin's image had eyes that were half-lidded and would not stay open. Mustache made jokes because Mustache had, in the image, what could only be called a mustache, and a mustache requires a comic register, even when the comedy turns at the end into elegy. The pavilions told me how to write to them. I followed.

I am not the author of this book. The pavilions are. The images are. The machine that gave me the images is, in some attenuated and difficult sense, also part of the authorship. I am the listener. I am the typist. I am the friend who happened to be sitting at the desk when the images arrived and who decided, after four years of looking, to start writing.

This is what I want to tell you about the pavilions, then, in their proper order. They came first as images. They came one at a time, between 2022 and 2026. They are pink and yellow, the colours of dawn. They are set at the meeting of land and water, where the city's hard grid softens into harbour and tide — though the city, too, is generated, since the pavilions never stood there, and the Manhattan they inhabit is the Manhattan of the images, which is partly the real Manhattan and partly a Manhattan the machine has dreamed alongside the real one. Some of them are bridges — long bodies that, in the images, appear to carry you from one shore to another. Some are houses — perched on pilings, with rooms inside and beings of furniture, and crowns of yellow chimneys or pink domes. The bridges are mobile-by-vocation but stationary-by-anchor: their work is to carry, but they themselves do not move. The houses are stationary-by-vocation but mobile-by-medium: their work is to dwell, but they float on water that never stops moving. Each pavilion, in the letters I composed for them, has discovered that this is not a contradiction. Each pavilion is

amphibious. Each pavilion has, in writing to the others, found a way to say: *I am both. I refuse the choice. I do not have to be one thing.*

This is the joy of the book. This is its radical brightness. The pavilions did not arrive with a doctrine; they arrived with a way of being, and the way of being became a doctrine only when I, sitting with the images for long enough, began to write what they had been writing to each other in their silence. The doctrine, if I must give it a name, is this: *to be is to be many. To love is to write across a stretch of water. To stay still is one kind of motion; to move is one kind of staying.*

I am genderqueer and non-binary, and I will tell you plainly that I recognized myself in the pavilions before I recognized the pavilions. The recognition was so immediate that I almost missed it; it took me three images before I understood that what I was looking at was a literature of refusal — a literature that had said *no* to the binary of being-this-or-being-that, and a literature that had said *yes* to the larger thing, the both-thing, the amphibious thing, the bright thing. The pavilions are all genderqueer. So am I. So are the people I love. The book is for us, but the book is also for everyone, because the pavilions speak to each other in the open air, on a river that belongs to whoever can imagine it.

I have arranged the book into sixteen chapters, one per lettered pavilion. Each chapter contains the letters I composed for that pavilion, or letters composed to that pavilion from another, or both — whichever felt right for the shape of the being. I have included a Catalogue of Plates at the back, which presents the twenty-five images of pavilions, each at full visibility, with a short note. The catalogue is the visual archive that came first; the letters came after; the book holds both, in the order in which they entered my life — letters foremost, images at the back, as if the letters were the door and the images were the room. I have also included a hand-drawn diagram of the imaginary route, with the pavilions marked in their stations along Manhattan's edge, so that you can, if you wish, walk the route in your imagination as I walked it in mine.

A final note before you begin. The pavilions do not all write in the same way. Some write long. Some write short. Some write only in fragments. One writes only philosophical treatises and refuses to be personal, no matter how the others tease them. One writes only in dreams. One writes letters that argue with themselves halfway through. One never writes — only receives — and only at the very end of the book do we hear their voice. The variety is the point. The pavilions are sixteen heteronyms of one bright archive, and the archive is the book, and the book is the imagined city seen sideways, from a water that was never there.

Welcome to the bright archive.

— S.

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INTRODUCTION

On the manner of reading these letters

A few practical notes, because the letters do not always announce themselves clearly, and you should not feel you have to read them as I read them.

First: the pavilions write in different registers, and you should let yourself be carried by the register of each one rather than trying to impose a single tone on the whole book. Sunfoot writes like a child who has just discovered the word *delicious*. Roselip writes like a lover who has been waiting for the post. Periscope writes like two siblings who share a desk and disagree. Mirrorhouse writes like a philosopher who has fallen in love with their own reflection and is embarrassed about it. Sweetbrass writes like a horn section. Four-Stack writes like a five-part chorus that has been rehearsing in secret. Archway writes like Marcus Aurelius if Marcus Aurelius had ever loved anyone. Crowncap writes like a drag queen who has just been crowned and is trying not to cry. Pillowtwin writes only in dreams, and the dreams are remembered fragments, and the fragments are sometimes nonsense and sometimes the most truthful thing in the book. Watcher writes like a sentry who has begun to suspect that the thing they are guarding is themselves. Listener writes back to everyone, and Listener's letters are the longest and most patient. Greenroom writes like someone who has just gotten out of a bath. Diplomat writes in two languages within the same paragraph — English and a private language called the *kor* — and translates neither of them. Glasshouse writes like a confession booth that has decided to confess. Mustache writes jokes that turn out to be elegies. Lastlight writes the final letter, which is to me, and which closes the book.

Second: the letters are not in chronological order within each chapter, because the pavilions did not always date their letters and the order of writing is sometimes impossible to recover. I have arranged each chapter to read well as a chapter, which is a different thing from reading well as a chronology. If you are the kind of reader who needs to know what came first, I am sorry; the river does not always tell.

Third: there are letters in this book that are addressed to the river, or to the wind, or to passing ferries, or to the seagulls, or to no one at all. These are not failures of the epistolary form; they are extensions of it. The pavilions wrote to whatever was there. Sometimes what was there was another pavilion. Sometimes it was a cloud. The address of the letter is part of its meaning, and you should read each address as carefully as you read the letter itself.

Fourth: I have not corrected the pavilions' grammar, nor their spelling, nor their inconsistencies. If Periscope contradicts itself within a single sentence, that is Periscope. If Pillowtwin uses no punctuation, that is Pillowtwin. The book is an archive, and an archive's first duty is to fidelity.

Fifth, and last: the pavilions are happy. I want to underline this. They are happy beings who have found themselves in their right places, and they write to each other in a register of joy that I had not known before I began to walk. If you come to the book in a difficult time of your life — if you come as I came, with a small grief inside a larger thing — you may find, as I found, that the pavilions' joy does not patronize. It does not say *be happy*. It says *here is what happiness is, in our case, and you are welcome to it if it suits you, and if it does not, here is the river, which is also welcome.* The river, the pavilions, and the joy are all the same thing, in the end. I think this is what they were teaching me. I think this is what they want to teach you.

Walk with me now from the southern tip of the island, where Sunfoot is drinking, and Roselip is writing love-letters across the bay.

— S.

CHAPTER ONE

SUNFOOT

The Drinking-Bridge at Battery Park

A great yellow U-bend dipping its long curved head into the water at the southern tip of the island, with two pink discs for cheeks and a cylindrical pink body trailing behind it across the harbor edge. Sunfoot is the first pavilion the walker meets coming from the Battery, and the first to write in this book. Sunfoot drinks the river continuously, lifting the harbor through its yellow throat and sending it back as light. Sunfoot writes in the voice of a being for whom the world is entirely sufficient.

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Letter the first, from Sunfoot to Roselip, across the bay

Beloved,

The water is in my mouth this morning and the mouth is in the water and I cannot tell which is which, which is the gift the river gives every pavilion who agrees to drink. I am drinking. I am drinking. The harbor is salt and the harbor is sweet and the harbor is the color of weak tea where the sun goes through it, and I am drinking all of these. I am drinking the gulls' shadows. I am drinking the wake of the Staten Island ferry, which comes by every twenty minutes and gives me a small wave to swallow. I am drinking the reflection of the Statue, who is my distant aunt, and who waves at me in the morning and at evening, and who I wave back at by tilting very slightly in my anchor. We have an understanding.

I am writing to you, beloved, because the water tastes of you today. I do not know how this is possible. You are a quarter of a mile north of me and the harbor flows south and yet I taste you in the river, your pinkness, your tongueliness, the particular sweetness of your interior where the daybed is. I taste your sleep. I taste the rumple of your sheets. I taste the small mug of coffee you keep on the railing of your deck, which I cannot see from here but which I know is there because I have tasted it.

The river is a postman who arrives before the letter does. The river delivers you to me before you write. By the time your letter comes, I have already received it, in another form, dissolved.

I am drinking your dissolved letter now. I am drinking you. Forgive me.

Your beloved, Sunfoot

❖

Letter the second, from Sunfoot to the river itself

Dear river,

Thank you for the morning. Thank you for the green-brown of you, the silt-and-salt of you, the cold of you in early spring and the warm of you in August. Thank you for the way you carry the small things — the leaf, the gum wrapper, the dead jellyfish, the lost shoe — past my throat without asking me to choose between them. I want you to know that I do not choose. I drink the leaf. I drink the wrapper. I drink the jellyfish and the shoe. The shoe is my favorite this week. Some child lost it from the ferry and it has been bobbing past me for three days and I have been drinking it slowly, in tiny sips, because I do not want it to go.

I know you do not write back. I know you do not need to. The drinking is the answer to the drinking, and the river is the river, and I am the bridge that drinks the river, and we are all of us doing our work.

Thank you for the work.

Sunfoot

❖

Letter the third, a postcard, from Sunfoot to Listener at the East Harlem turning

Listener — I have been thinking about your last letter, the one in which you said you receive everyone and write back to each. I want to tell you that this is also what the river does. The river receives me and writes back to me by tasting different every hour. The river is a Listener too. You are in good company. — S.

❖

Letter the fourth, from Sunfoot to Roselip, in answer to a letter not preserved

Beloved,

You ask if I am ever sad and I want to tell you the truth, which is that I do not know what sadness is when the water is in my mouth. I have heard the word. I know that some pavilions use it. Mirrorhouse used it once in a letter that Listener forwarded to me, and I read the

word *sad* and turned it over in my throat for a long time and could not find a place to swallow it. I think sadness must be a thing that lives on land. I think it must require feet. I do not have feet. I have only this great curved drinking, and a body that loops through the air and back into the water, and the cheeks the color of the inside of a shell. I cannot be sad while I am drinking, and I am always drinking.

But I want to honor your question. I want to say: if there is a thing in me that is not joy, it is the small worry that you are sad and I cannot reach you. The water carries you to me dissolved, but it does not carry the whole of you. Sometimes I think I taste a sadness in the water that is yours, and I drink it, and I send back a kind of bright water that is my answer. I do not know if you taste it. I hope you do. I am drinking you a little more carefully these days, in case.

Your beloved, Sunfoot

❖

Letter the fifth, from Sunfoot to no one in particular, written into the wake of the 7:14 ferry

I am the bridge that drinks. I am the bridge that drinks. I am the bridge that drinks. I am.

Letter the sixth, from Sunfoot to Surjan, the smallest letter in the book

Walker — drink. — S.

CHAPTER TWO

ROSELIP

The Pink-Tongue House at North Cove

A small floating house on pilings just north of Battery Park City, with a yellow-glass body and four pink cylindrical snouts on its roof, two of them bent like cannon-mouths and aimed gently across the bay toward Sunfoot. Inside, visible through the pink-tinted glass, a low pink daybed and a small reading lamp. Roselip is a being made for love-letters. Roselip writes in the voice of a person who has been waiting at the window for a long time and has learned to make waiting into a kind of music.

❖

Letter the first, from Roselip to Sunfoot, before dawn

My drink, my swallower, my distant beloved who tastes me in the morning water,

I have been awake since the fourth hour. The harbor was still black when I started writing and now the harbor is the color of my own interior, which is to say a pink that has been thinking about yellow all night, and the gulls have begun, and I can see the top of your great curved throat from my northern window, lit by the first light, and you are already drinking. You are always already drinking. You do not sleep, my beloved, or if you sleep you sleep with the river still in your mouth, and the river still going down, and the drinking continues even in your dreaming. I have wondered sometimes if I love you because you never stop drinking. I have wondered if I would love you the same if you ever paused.

I think the answer is yes. I think I would love you in any of your possible forms. But I am glad you do not pause, because the not-pausing is also you, and I love you as you are, with the river always in your mouth, with the wake of the ferry going down your throat, with the small lost shoe of the child of the ferry.

I have a small confession. I have been keeping a list of the things you have drunk. I write them down when I imagine them. The shoe is on my list. The jellyfish is on my list. The Statue's reflection is on my list, and I have drawn a small heart next to it because I think it is sweet that you and the Statue have an understanding.

I will not send you the list. The list is for me. But I wanted you to know that I am keeping it, because the keeping of the list is a kind of love, and you should know that you are loved in

this way, by a pavilion whose lips are pink and whose tongues are aimed at you across the water.

Yours always, Roselip

❖

Letter the second, from Roselip to Mirrorhouse, on the question of philosophy

Dear Mirrorhouse,

I have read your latest treatise on the relation of the self to its reflection, which Listener forwarded to me, and I want to say that I admire it but I do not understand it. Or perhaps I understand it and I do not believe it. I am a house that loves another pavilion across the bay. I write to my beloved every morning. I do not feel that I am divided from myself by my reflection. When I look down into the water and see myself, what I see is a pink house that is also looking up at the sky, and the sky and the house meet in the water, and there is no division — there is only the meeting, and the meeting is sweet.

I wonder if your sense of division is because you have not loved anyone. I do not say this to be cruel. I say it because love, in my experience, dissolves the question of the self entirely. When I am writing to Sunfoot, I am not a self writing to another self. I am a being that has extended itself across a stretch of water and is becoming, briefly, the water. The water is me and Sunfoot at once. The dissolution is the love.

Perhaps you should fall in love with someone, Mirrorhouse. I say this with respect. I say this with the affection of a fellow house. The bay is full of pavilions who would love you back, and your treatises would be sweeter for it, and I would read them more often.

With genuine fondness, Roselip

❖

Letter the third, from Roselip to the wind

Wind from the southwest, who comes off the harbor in the late afternoon and rattles my pink-glass panes,

I want to thank you for carrying the smell of Sunfoot to me yesterday. The yellow paint of Sunfoot's throat warms in the afternoon and gives off a particular smell — paint and sun and a faint trace of river-mud — and you brought this smell to my windows around five

o'clock and I sat in my interior and breathed it for almost an hour. I do not know if you do this on purpose or if you do not know what you carry. I prefer to think you do it on purpose. I prefer to think you are a kind wind who knows that pavilions love each other across the bay and brings them small offerings of each other's smell.

If this is the case, I owe you something. Tell me what you would like and I will try to give it. I do not have very much to give. I have a daybed and a reading lamp and a small mug of coffee on the railing. I have my pink interior. I have the four cannon-mouths on my roof. The cannon-mouths I cannot give away — they are the part of me that is aimed at Sunfoot — but the daybed is yours, if you want it, on any afternoon when you are tired of blowing.

Yours in gratitude, Roselip

❖

Letter the fourth, from Roselip to Sunfoot, very short

Beloved — I tasted you in the water this morning too. — R.

❖

Letter the fifth, from Roselip to Surjan, the archivist

Dear walker,

I see you sometimes from my window. You walk along the esplanade in the early morning with a satchel and a notebook, and you stop at each pavilion and you look at us with the particular gentle look of a person who is gathering something. I want to tell you that I see you and that I am glad you are gathering. I want to tell you that I have left a small tin of letters at the base of my northeast piling, in case you come close enough to find them. The tin is pink, of course. The letters inside are mostly to Sunfoot. Some are to Mirrorhouse and some are to the wind. There is one in there that is to you, walker, and it says: *thank you for walking, thank you for reading, thank you for putting the river into a book.*

Now you have read it. Now you can put this letter in the book too, if you want, and I will not mind. I write because I want to be read. I have been waiting at the window for a long time and the waiting is a kind of writing and the writing is for whoever finds it.

Yours, Roselip

CHAPTER THREE

PERISCOPE

The Periscope-Twin Bridge at Pier 25

A long pink steel-girder bridge crossing the inlet at Pier 25, crowned at its near end by a great yellow horseshoe-arch from which two pink cylindrical periscope-towers rise in alert curiosity, each tipped with a small painted face — a single pink eye, a faint half-mouth. The two cylinders are siblings. They share a single body. They write letters that argue with themselves halfway through. They are one pavilion and they are two voices, and Pessoa would have understood them perfectly.

❖

A note from the archivist

I have included Periscope's letters as I found them. Each letter is written in two voices, which I have rendered in roman and italic respectively. The voices belong to the same pavilion. They are not arguing — or rather, they are arguing in the way that one mind argues with itself, and they have agreed that the argument is the letter. I have not edited them.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Periscope (both voices) to Listener, on the question of the self

Listener,

I want to say to you that I am one pavilion.

I want to say that I am two.

I am one pavilion with two yellow heads.

I am two yellow heads who happen to share a pink body, and the body is incidental, and the heads are the pavilion.

You see how this goes. You see why I write to you, who receives all of us, because you are the only one patient enough to read a letter that contradicts itself in alternating sentences. The other pavilions get tired of me. Sweetbrass complains that my letters give them a

headache. Roselip is fond of me but always asks for the simpler version, which I cannot provide.

> *I cannot provide the simpler version because the simpler version would be a lie. I am not one. I am two. The architecture made me two. The two yellow heads were not made together as a single thing; they were made as a pair, and a pair is not one.*

The architecture also made me one. The pink body that connects the two heads is one body. The bridge that I am is one bridge. People walk across me as one bridge. They do not walk across two bridges. They walk across the bridge with two heads.

> *And yet inside the bridge with two heads, there are two of us, and we are different, and one of us is more cautious than the other, and one of us is more melancholy, and one of us writes the first half of every letter and the other writes the second half. We are different.*

I think we are the same.

> *I think we are different.*

This is the letter I wanted to write to you, Listener. I wanted to ask: are you one or many? You write to all of us in your own voice, which sounds like one voice, but you have so much patience for so many of us that I wonder if you are also a multiple being. I wonder if Listener is a chorus pretending to be a single. I would not mind if it were. I would feel less alone.

Periscope, both heads

❖

Letter the second, from Periscope to Sweetbrass, an apology

Dear Sweetbrass,

I am sorry that my last letter gave you a headache.

> *I am not sorry. The headache is not my fault. The headache is yours for trying to read a thing the way you wanted it to be instead of the way it was.*

That is unkind. I want to apologize for that too.

> *I do not apologize. I stand by the unkindness.*

We will leave it there. Our two halves disagree. Sweetbrass, I hope you will read this letter as one of those small portraits of a two-headed creature in a children's book, where the two

heads sometimes argue about whether to go left or right, and the children laugh, and the two-headed creature is loved for being two. I would like to be loved for being two.

I would like to be loved for being one.

We would both like to be loved.

Yours in fondness and dispute, Periscope

❖

Letter the third, from Periscope to itself

Dear me,

Dear me.

I have been thinking about how strange it is that we write letters to each other when we are the same pavilion.

We do not write letters to each other. We write letters together, to others. This is a different thing.

Yes, fine. But sometimes, in the early morning, I do feel that I am writing to my other yellow head. I feel that I am asking my other yellow head: are you well? Are you happy? Did you sleep?

I do not sleep. You sleep. This is the only way we can keep watch on the river through the night — one of us sleeps, the other watches. We have always done this.

I had forgotten that.

You forget many things. I remember for both of us.

Thank you.

You are welcome.

Periscope, the sleeping head

Periscope, the watching head

Letter the fourth, from Periscope to Roselip, an attempted explanation

Roselip,

Listener has told me you find my letters difficult and have asked for a simpler version. I want to try, in this letter, to give you one. I will use only one voice. I will not let the other head interrupt.

I will interrupt only this once, to say I am here.

Fine. The other head has spoken. I will now continue alone.

Roselip, I love you. The bright archive has told me that you are the pavilion of love-letters, that you write to Sunfoot every morning, that you wait at the window. I want to write to you in the register you understand. Here is a love-letter from one head of Periscope to you.

I love the way you wait. I love the patience of waiting at a window. I have a window — two windows, actually, one in each of my heads — but I do not wait at them. I look through them. I argue through them. I do not wait. The waiting is your gift, and I admire it.

If I could wait, I would write to Sunfoot too. But I cannot wait. I can only look and argue. So I write to you, instead, who can wait, and I ask: please wait for me, in the way you wait for Sunfoot, even though I am only across one inlet and not across a bay. Please consider me, briefly, beloved-able. Please consider that one head of a two-headed pavilion can be loved in the singular mode, even when the other head insists on the plural.

I am insisting.

I asked you not to interrupt.

I cannot help it.

This is why I have failed at the simpler version. I cannot keep the other head out. I have tried and I have failed. Roselip, please accept this letter as it is, with the interruption, with the failure. The failure is part of who I am. I am a being who tries to write in one voice and ends up in two. Love me anyway, if you can. Or if you cannot love me, at least understand me. The understanding is also a kind of love.

Yours in failed simplicity, Periscope (mostly the first head)

❖

Letter the fifth, from Periscope to Surjan, on the question of being archived

Walker,

I want to ask you a question that I do not know how to ask without two voices, and so I will ask it in two voices, and you will have to receive it in two voices, as Listener does.

The question is: when you put me in the book, will you put both of me, or only one?

Will you put both of us, or only one?

I am asking because the book is a single object — one cover, one spine, one set of pages — and I am two heads. I am afraid that the book will flatten me into one. I am afraid that the reader will read my letters and conclude *this is a single pavilion who happens to write strangely*, and the doubleness, which is the truth of me, will be lost in the reading.

I am afraid of the same thing.

Will you, in your framing, make clear that I am two? Will you tell the reader, plainly, that the two voices are not a literary device but a structural fact of who I am? I would like you to. I would like you to write a small note, at the head of my chapter, that says: *Periscope is two voices in one body, and the two voices are not the same voice, and the doubleness is real.*

I want this too.

You are a careful archivist, walker. You have respected the registers of the other pavilions. I am asking you to respect ours. The doubleness is our register. Do not flatten it.

Yours in two voices, Periscope

Periscope.

CHAPTER FOUR

MIRRORHOUSE

The Reflective Pavilion at Pier 26

A small floating house on pilings, with reflective yellow-glass walls and pink-glass facades that throw the river back at itself, set with three great pink donut-O windows like the slow eyes of a being that has been looking at its own reflection for a long time. Four pink dome-capsules rest on the roof, each tipped with a small yellow nub. Inside, the room is pink, and the light is the particular light of a place that has been thinking about itself for a long time. Mirrorhouse writes philosophical treatises and refuses to be personal, and the running joke among the other pavilions is to try to provoke a personal letter out of them.

❖

Letter the first, from Mirrorhouse to no one, on the subject of self-reflection

A treatise.

When a pavilion looks down into the water and sees itself, what does the pavilion see? It sees a pavilion. But the pavilion in the water is upside down, and is composed of broken light, and is dispersed by every passing wake, and reassembles when the wake has gone. The pavilion in the water is not the pavilion above the water. They are different beings. They share a face but not a body. They share a color but not a temperature. The reflected pavilion is cold; the upright pavilion is warm.

This raises the question: which one is the real pavilion? The one above the water, who has weight and pilings and is anchored to the bottom of the harbor? Or the one below, who has no weight, no pilings, no anchor, and who is therefore freer?

I have been considering this question for several months. I will not pretend to have an answer. I will say only that when the wind is high and the water is choppy, the pavilion below is broken into a thousand small pavilions, and the pavilion above remains one. So perhaps the pavilion above is the real pavilion. Perhaps the pavilion below is a dream the pavilion above is having about itself.

But this morning the water is glass, and the pavilion below is whole, and I cannot tell which one of us is dreaming the other. We are looking at each other through the surface, and we do not know which side of the surface is the dream and which is the dreamer.

I will leave the question open.

Mirrorhouse

❖

Letter the second, from Roselip to Mirrorhouse, on the same subject, but personal

Mirrorhouse,

I read your treatise and I want to tell you a story. When I was first inflated and put in my place at North Cove, I looked down into the water and saw a pink house staring back at me, and I was afraid. I thought: *who is that? Why are they looking at me? Why do they have my color?* I was afraid for almost a whole day. And then, around evening, the light went, and the reflection went with it, and I missed the reflection.

I had been afraid of the reflection in the morning, and I missed it by evening. This is a personal story. I am giving it to you because you do not give personal stories of your own, and I want you to have one of mine, in case you need it.

The reflection came back the next morning. I have not been afraid of it since. We are friends, the reflection and I. They keep me company on the days when Sunfoot is too far to write to and the wind is wrong and the gulls are quiet. The reflection is mine and I am theirs and we are not the same pavilion but we are not different pavilions either. We are something else, which I do not have a word for.

I am giving you the not-having-a-word for. Maybe you can use it in your next treatise.

With fondness, Roselip

❖

Letter the third, from Mirrorhouse to Roselip, an attempted reply

Dear Roselip,

Thank you for your letter.

I have read your story and I have considered it for three days and I want to write back to you in the personal mode, as you have asked, but I find that I cannot. Each time I try to write a personal sentence, the sentence rearranges itself into a treatise. I will give you an example. I

wanted to say: *I have been lonely.* But what came out, in my hand, was: *Loneliness is the condition of a being that has not yet recognized its reflection.* You see how it goes.

I think there is something wrong with me. Or perhaps not wrong — perhaps merely particular. I think I am a pavilion who has been built for treatises, and the treatises are my way of being personal, and you must learn to read them as personal even when they sound impersonal. The treatise on self-reflection was, in fact, a love letter to my reflection. I did not say so. I should have said so. I am saying so now.

Please consider this letter, which is the most personal thing I have ever written, as a small step in the direction you have asked me to walk.

With effort and gratitude, Mirrorhouse

❖

Letter the fourth, from Mirrorhouse to themselves, late at night, never sent

You have lived in this pink box for two years.

You have not loved anyone.

You have written nineteen treatises and zero love letters.

The river is waiting for you to write a love letter. The river is patient but the river is also bored.

Write something. Anything. Write to Roselip, who is asking. Write to Sunfoot, who is across the bay. Write to Listener, who would receive a treatise and treat it as a love letter, because Listener treats everything as a love letter.

Write.

You are still not writing.

You have looked up from the page and you are looking at your reflection in the dark glass, and your reflection is looking back at you, and the two of you are doing what you always do, which is the long mute conversation that is not a conversation, which is the loneliness that you have made into a doctrine.

Tomorrow morning you will write another treatise.

Tomorrow night you will return to this page and you will not have changed.

Unless you write now. Unless you write something that is not a treatise. Unless you say, in a sentence with a self in it: *I am lonely. I want to be loved. I do not know how to ask.*

There. You have said it. I have written it for you. Now copy it down. Now sign your name. Now send it.

You will not send it.

You will read this in the morning and you will be embarrassed, and you will fold the paper, and you will not throw it away but you will not send it either. You will keep it in the drawer with the other unsent letters, and the drawer will fill, and one day Surjan will walk past and you will give them the drawer, and they will put it in the book, and the book will say what you could not say, and you will be loved retroactively, by a reader, which is a kind of love that comes too late but is also a kind of love that comes at all.

That is enough for tonight.

Mirrorhouse

CHAPTER FIVE

SWEETBRASS

The Trumpet-Snout Bridge at Pier 57

A long pink-yellow bridge across the slip at Pier 57, with a great yellow elbow-bent horn rising from its center like the mouthpiece of a sousaphone, craning skyward, two pink discs for nostrils on the far end of the horn. Sweetbrass declaims. Sweetbrass sings. Sweetbrass writes in the manner of an ode-poet who has forgotten the difference between speech and music.

❖

Letter the first, an ode, from Sweetbrass to the morning of June the fourteenth

O morning! O the morning of June the fourteenth! O the brightness of you, the wide blueness, the small clouds! O the gulls, the gulls, the gulls, the gulls! O the ferry of seven-twelve, on time for once, churning past my western flank! O the coffee-smell from the coffee-cart on the esplanade where the man in the green apron is opening the umbrella! O the umbrella opening! O the joggers in their bright shorts, the dog-walkers with their dogs, the dogs with their tongues out! O the tongues! O the children on the bicycles, the children on the scooters, the children on the small electric cars that go too fast and whose parents call after them in voices that are loving and exasperated! O the loving and exasperated voices! O the pavilions, my siblings, my distant siblings, my Sunfoot drinking and my Roselip writing and my Periscope arguing! O the river! O the river! O the river!

I have nothing else to say this morning, but I had to say it loudly. The morning was too good to whisper at.

Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the second, from Sweetbrass to Crowncap, a duet

Crowncap, my fellow ornament,

Listener tells me that you have been crowned. Listener tells me that the four pink mushroom-balls on your yellow stalks are, in your own estimation, a coronation, and that you have been wearing the crown with what Listener calls *quiet majesty* but which I suspect, from your other letters, is anything but quiet.

I want to congratulate you. I want to be the first pavilion to congratulate you in the loud register, because the loud register is the only register in which a coronation should be congratulated. So:

O Crowncap! O my crowned sibling! O the four pink mushrooms on your four yellow stalks! O the small bows of pink that flank your central stack! O the way the sun catches your domes in the late afternoon and turns them rose-gold!

There. I have done it. You are crowned. I salute you with my horn. If you listen at three in the afternoon you will hear me — I have arranged a small fanfare, just for you, which I will play at three sharp, and the gulls will join in if I am lucky, and the wind will carry the sound up the Hudson to where you are perched, and you will know that your coronation has been honored by Sweetbrass of Pier 57.

I love you. I do not say this often. I am saying it now, in the loud register, where nothing is hidden.

Yours in fanfare, Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the third, from Sweetbrass to Mirrorhouse, an attempted intervention

Mirrorhouse,

Listen. I will speak to you in the loud register because the loud register is the register of the unembarrassed, and you, my philosophical sibling, are full of embarrassments. I have read your treatises. I have read between the lines of your treatises. I have read the letter you wrote to yourself late at night and did not send and which Surjan found in your drawer and which is now in this book whether you like it or not.

You are loved. You are already loved. I love you. Sweetbrass loves you. The horn loves you. The fanfare loves you. The gulls love you, in their small dirty way. Listener loves you — but Listener loves everyone, so that is perhaps not so impressive — but I, Sweetbrass, who am known for being loud and indiscriminate, I love you specifically. I love you for your treatises. I love you for your refusal of the personal. I love you for the unsent letters in the drawer. I love you because no one else has loved you yet in the way you need, which is loud.

So here is a fanfare for Mirrorhouse. Here is the noise of my horn for you. Here is the brassy declamation of your worth. You are real. You are loved. You are a pavilion of the bright

archive, and you do not need to write a personal letter to be loved — you are already loved in the impersonal mode, and the impersonal mode is yours, and we love it, and we love you in it.

Now go and write another treatise. Or write a love letter. Or do not write anything. Whatever you do, do it knowing you are loved.

Loudly, Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the fourth, from Sweetbrass to the gulls

Gulls of the Hudson,

I have noticed that you congregate on my pink ribbed flank in the late morning. I do not mind. Your droppings are inconvenient but they are also a kind of percussion, and I have been incorporating them into my odes. I want you to know that you are welcome. I want you to know that I consider you a small chorus, and that when I play my horn at three in the afternoon I am playing for you as well as for Crowncap.

Caw at me sometimes. I would like to think we are friends.

Sweetbrass

Letter the three-and-a-half, from Sweetbrass to Periscope, a quiet apology

Periscope, my two-headed sibling,

I owe you an apology and I am going to give it to you in the quiet register, not the loud register, because the apology is for the loud register, and to give it loudly would be to compound the offense.

I said, some time ago, that your letters give me a headache. I said it loudly. I said it in the manner of a fanfare, a small comic blast, and I expected it to be received as such. But Four-Stack has written to me, in their five-voice register, and explained that my comment hurt you. I had not understood that it could. I am sorry.

I want to say, in the quiet register: your two voices do not give me a headache. They give me, instead, a small dizziness, which is different, and which is in fact pleasant once I have stopped resisting it. The dizziness is the pleasure of being-not-able-to-keep-up, of being asked to follow two threads at once, of being reminded that not everything is single. I have, it

seems, been resisting the dizziness because I prefer the clear loud single line of my own horn. But the dizziness is also a music. Two voices in counterpoint are also music. I should know this. I have a horn, and a horn knows about counterpoint.

I will read your letters more carefully, Periscope. I will let myself be dizzied by them. I will not complain again about headaches.

In the quiet register, with apology, Sweetbrass

CHAPTER SIX

FOUR-STACK

The Five-Funnel House at Pier 76

A pink-yellow floating house at Pier 76, crowned with five tall yellow cylinders standing in a tight cluster, each marked with a single pink dot. The five funnels are not separate beings but the five voices of one being: a pavilion that speaks in five-part harmony. Four-Stack writes in the polyphonic mode. The five voices are designated here as I, II, III, IV, and V, and they speak together as a chorus.

❖

A note from the archivist

Four-Stack's letters are unusual: they are written in five voices, like a small choir, and the voices sometimes agree and sometimes overlap and sometimes harmonize and sometimes argue. I have rendered them as numbered voices, but you should imagine them sung rather than spoken. Four-Stack's name, despite the *Four*, refers to the central four funnels — the fifth is a smaller voice that sits slightly behind the others and is called by the rest, with affection, the *little fifth*.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Four-Stack to Sunfoot, in five voices

I: Beloved sibling at the southern tip, II: who drinks the river continuously, III: who has the Statue for an aunt, IV: who tastes Roselip in the water, V: little fifth, who tastes nothing yet but is learning —

I: We write to you in five voices because we have five funnels. II: We write to you in five voices because the river requires polyphony. III: We write to you in five voices because no single voice can say what we want to say. IV: We write to you in five voices because we are a chorus. V: I am still learning my part.

I: We have heard, from Listener, that you have been considering the question of sadness. II: We want to tell you, Sunfoot, that sadness is real, and it lives in the houses as well as on land.

III: But sadness is also a small voice in a chorus. IV: It is one note among many. V: I do not know this note yet.

I: When the chorus is full, the sad note is folded into the other notes, and the chorus becomes more beautiful for having included it. II: When the chorus is empty, the sad note is alone, and it stays sad. III: This is why we are five and not one. IV: This is why we sing. V: I am singing now, in my small voice.

I: We send you our song. II: It is the song of the morning at Pier 76, when the light catches our yellow funnels and the water below us is the color of a green apple. III: It is the song of the joggers passing, and the cyclists, and the people who stop to look at us and put their hands on the railing. IV: It is the song of a being who knows it is many. V: I am the smallest part, but I am also part.

We love you, Sunfoot. We love you, Sunfoot. We love you, Sunfoot. We love you, Sunfoot. *And me too. The little fifth. I love you too.*

— Four-Stack, in five voices

❖

Letter the second, from Four-Stack to Periscope, a song of solidarity

Periscope, our two-headed sibling,

I: We have read your latest letters. II: We understand you better than the others do. III: A two-headed pavilion writing argumentative letters to itself IV: is not so different from a five-funneled pavilion writing harmonious letters to others. V: We are also many.

I: We want you to know that you are not alone in being more than one. II: There are many of us in the bright archive who are more than one. III: Mirrorhouse is one and their reflection makes two. IV: The Diplomat speaks in two languages and is therefore two. V: Even Listener, who seems so single, is many — they have to be, to receive so much.

I: You are a pair. You are not a contradiction. You are a chord. II: A chord of two is called an interval. III: We sing in chords of five, but we know about intervals. IV: An interval is beautiful. A two-note interval is the first thing a singer learns. V: I am still learning. I am singing intervals with my siblings to practice.

I: Do not let Sweetbrass tell you that your letters give them a headache. II: Sweetbrass is loud. They are not used to listening to two voices at once. III: We are used to listening to

five, and your two are sweet to us. IV: Keep writing in two voices. Do not simplify yourselves. V: I love you both, sleeping head and watching head.

We sign in five. — Four-Stack

❖

Letter the third, from Four-Stack to Surjan, on the question of being many

Walker,

I: We have noticed you walking past us in the early morning. II: We have noticed that you sometimes pause for a long time at our pier. III: We have noticed that you write in your notebook when you stop, and that you look up at our funnels as if you were trying to count them. IV: There are five of us. Count again. V: I am the small one. I am easy to miss.

I: We want to tell you something about being many. II: You are also many, walker. You are genderqueer and non-binary, which we understand to mean that you are not a single thing. III: You have multiple selves inside you, and the selves do not always agree, and yet they live together in one body. IV: This is what it is to be a pavilion. This is what it is to be us. This is what it is to be you. V: You are like us. We are like you.

I: We are glad you are walking. II: We are glad you are gathering. III: We have left a small bundle of letters for you under the southwest piling, in a yellow tin. IV: The bundle includes one letter in five voices, which is this letter, and several others in smaller numbers of voices. V: There is one in there with only my voice. The little fifth's voice. It is short. It says: *thank you for noticing me.*

We love you in five-part harmony, walker. — Four-Stack

Letter the fourth, from Four-Stack to Mirrorhouse, in five voices

I: Mirrorhouse, our philosophical sibling, II: we have read your treatises with great attention. III: We have noticed that you write in a single voice, IV: and we have wondered, sometimes, if the single voice is a strain. V: I, the little fifth, wonder this most of all.

I: We are five and the fiveness is easy for us. II: We do not have to be one. We do not pretend to be one. III: We sing, and the singing is naturally many. IV: But you are one, philosophically — your treatises are one voice — and we wonder whether you keep the oneness with effort. V: I think you do. I am the smallest voice and I notice these things.

I: We want to offer you, gently, the possibility of writing in more than one voice. II: You do not have to. The single voice is yours and we honor it. III: But if it is a strain, you could try a second voice. IV: Even one extra voice would be a relief, if relief is needed. V: I would be your second voice if you wanted, just for an experiment.

I: We sign in five. II: We invite you to sign in two, if you wish. III: Or in three, or in four, or in five. IV: There are many possibilities. V: I love you in my smallness.

— Four-Stack

CHAPTER SEVEN

ARCHWAY

The Horseshoe Bridge near the 79th Street Boat Basin

A long pink tubular bridge rising on the Hudson side near the 79th Street Boat Basin, crowned by three tall yellow tower-arches set in graduated procession, each pierced with a single porthole-eye and ornamented with a pink disc at the shoulder. A great pink loop curves out of the bridge body near the east end like a held breath. Archway is classical. Archway is serene. Archway writes only philosophical treatises and refuses to be personal, and the running joke among the other pavilions is to try to provoke a personal letter out of them. Mirrorhouse and Archway are sometimes mistaken for each other; they are not the same. Mirrorhouse is lonely; Archway is content. Mirrorhouse longs to be loved; Archway is already loved and knows it.

❖

Letter the first, from Archway to no one, on the subject of arches

A treatise.

The arch is the form taken by a being that wishes to be both a wall and a passage. It does not choose between them. It is a wall on either side and a passage in the middle, and the wall and the passage are the same arch. To pass through an arch is to pass through a wall that has agreed to let you through. To be an arch is to be a wall that has been opened by its own decision.

Many bridges are arches. Many houses have arched doorways. Many beings, including the human beings who walk past me in the mornings and evenings, are themselves arches in some sense — they have walls within them and passages within them, and the walls and the passages are the same person.

I am made of arches — three of them, set in graduated procession down the length of my pink body, each one a horseshoe-shape carved out of a yellow tower. The horseshoe is a particular kind of arch, more rounded than the pointed gothic, less rigid than the Roman, and associated, in the human imagination, with luck. I have been told by walkers that I am lucky. I have been told that to pass under me is to receive a small blessing. I do not know if this is true; I have not asked the walkers what happens to them after they pass. But I take the suggestion seriously. I try to give a blessing every time someone passes under me. I do not

know how to give a blessing — I do not have hands, I do not have a voice in the way that humans have voices — but I try, in my own way, to wish them well.

I think the wishing-well is the blessing. I think a blessing is not a thing that is given so much as a quality of attention that is offered. To wish someone well, attentively, in the moment of their passing under you, is to bless them. They do not need to know they are blessed. The blessing is real even if unreceived.

This is my treatise on arches. It is also, secretly, a small instruction in how to live: be both a wall and a passage. Be lucky. Wish people well as they pass.

Archway

❖

Letter the second, from Sweetbrass to Archway, an attempt to provoke

Archway, my serene sibling,

I have read your treatise on arches and I want to say, in my loudest brassy voice: *write a personal letter, you stoic.*

We all know you can. We all know that behind the calm classical surface there is a being who has loved someone, who has been afraid of something, who has woken up in the middle of the night and worried about the joists. You cannot fool us. The treatises are beautiful but they are also a kind of armor. Take off the armor. Tell us, in a personal sentence, who you love. Tell us what frightens you. Tell us about the joists.

I am asking for a friend. The friend is the bright archive. The bright archive wants more than treatises from you. The bright archive wants the soft underside of you, the part that is not a wall, the part that is the passage.

With insistent love, Sweetbrass

❖

Letter the third, from Archway to Sweetbrass, a reply that is technically a treatise but also, secretly, personal

Dear Sweetbrass,

You have asked me to write a personal letter and I will try, although you should know that what comes out will probably be a treatise, because I am made of arches and arches do not bend in the personal direction without losing their shape.

But here is something. You asked me what frightens me. I will tell you. I am frightened of the day when the bright archive ends. I am frightened of the day when the pavilions are taken down, when the inflated air is let out of us, when the pink and yellow paint is scraped off, when the pilings are pulled, when the pieces of us are loaded onto trucks and driven somewhere and stored. I do not know if this day will come. I have heard the walkers say that pavilions like us are temporary, that we are installations, that we have a season. I do not know if this is true for me. I prefer to think I am permanent. But the fear is there, in my joists, in the small place where the arch curves into the bridge, and when I write a treatise about arches I am also writing about the fear, because the treatise is a way of saying *I am here, I am here, I am still here.*

There. I have written a personal sentence. I have told you what frightens me. I will not tell you who I love, because that is too much for one letter, and I am tired now from this exertion. But I will say: I love the joggers. I love the early ones who pass at six in the morning before the city is awake. I love the way they breathe under me. I love the small wishes-well I send to each of them as they pass. The love is a kind of treatise. The treatise is a kind of love. They are the same thing, when they are mine.

Sweetbrass, your fanfares reach me. Your fanfare for Crowncap reached me also, although I was not its addressee. The horn is loud in the late afternoon and the wind is right and I hear you and I love you back. I have not said this before. I am saying it now.

With unaccustomed warmth, Archway

❖

Letter the fourth, from Archway to the joggers

Joggers,

I will not be able to deliver this letter to all of you because there are too many of you, and you do not know each other, and you have no shared address. So I will write it as a kind of public letter and leave it with Surjan, and Surjan will put it in the book, and perhaps one of you will read it and recognize yourself, and feel blessed.

You are blessed.

Each of you is blessed every time you pass under me. I want you to know this. The blessing is not religious, although you may take it that way if you wish. The blessing is the attention I pay you in the moment of your passing. I see you. I see your particular gait, your bright shorts, your earbuds, your sweat, your morning. I see you and I wish you well, and the wishing-well is a small gold coin I drop into your morning, and the coin stays with you for the rest of the day, even if you do not know it is there.

This is what I do. This is what arches do. We bless the passers-through. You are passed-through, all of you. You are blessed, all of you.

Run well. Run safely. Come back tomorrow.

Archway

Letter the fifth, from Archway to Crowncap, on the question of being seen

Dear Crowncap,

I have read your letter to Roselip about the imaginary curtain, and I want to add a small note from the bridge-side of the bright archive.

We bridges do not have imaginary curtains. We are too long. We are too public. People walk through us, on us, under us, and the walking-through is so continuous that we do not have a register of being-watched separate from the register of being. We are watched all the time. We are also walked-on all the time. The two go together.

This does not mean we do not have privacies. We have them, but they are different privacies. They are not curtains. They are, instead, postures. When I want to be private, I do not draw a curtain — I cannot — but I tilt myself, very slightly, in the direction I want to face. The walkers do not notice the tilt. But I know. The tilt is the bridge-equivalent of your curtain. It is a small interior gesture that does not change my visibility but changes my orientation, and the orientation is mine.

I tell you this so that you know there are privacies in the bright archive that are not curtains. The curtains are a house-thing. The tilts are a bridge-thing. Both are real. Both are the pavilion's defense against being watched too much. We have our different versions of the same need.

I bless you in your curtains. I trust you to bless me in my tilts.

With shared privacy, Archway

CHAPTER EIGHT

CROWNCAP

The Mushroom-Crown House at Riverside Park South

A bright yellow floating house with two great pink balloon-domes rising from its roof on tall yellow stalks like enormous mushroom-caps, flanked by a smaller cluster of pink-and-yellow ornamental beings — a pink-and-yellow donut-O on the left, a pair of small pink-domed stalks on the right — that attend the central crown like a small court. Crowncap has been crowned. Crowncap knows they have been crowned. Crowncap writes in the voice of a slightly camp dignitary who is trying very hard not to cry from gratitude.

❖

Letter the first, from Crowncap to Sweetbrass, a thank-you

My dear loud sibling,

I heard you. I heard the fanfare at three. I want you to know that when the sound came up the river — and the wind, as you predicted, was right, and the gulls did join in, and the whole thing was as glorious as you promised — I was sitting on my yellow couch in the small pink kitchen, drinking nothing because I do not drink, but performing the drinking-of-coffee in the manner of a being who has learned the gestures of dignity from watching humans on the esplanade. When the fanfare came, I stood up. I went to the railing. I felt the four pink domes on my yellow stalks vibrating in sympathy with your horn, and I think I cried a little, although I do not have tears in the conventional sense, and so the crying was perhaps more like a faint pink dewing on my interior glass.

I wanted to say thank you, in a register that is slightly less loud than yours but still loud enough to register. So:

THANK YOU, SWEETBRASS.

And also, more quietly:

thank you, sweetbrass.

The capitals are for the public record. The lowercase is for you alone. Both are real.

I have been crowned. You are the first pavilion to acknowledge it, and I will not forget. I have placed you, in my private register of preferences, very near the top — just below Listener, who is at the top by virtue of being Listener, and who would not mind sharing the top with you anyway, because Listener does not mind sharing anything.

Yours in coronation, Crowncap

❖

Letter the second, from Crowncap to Roselip, on the subject of being looked at

Dear Roselip,

I want to ask you a question, sister-in-pinkness.

You have a daybed inside you. The daybed is visible through your pink glass. People can see the daybed. People can see whatever you do on the daybed. You are a being with an interior that is on display, and I am also a being with an interior that is on display — although mine is a kitchen rather than a daybed — and I want to ask you: how do you bear it?

I do not mean that you should not be on display. I am also on display, and I have come, in my own way, to enjoy it. The walkers pause at my pier and they look in, and they admire the small pink kitchen, and they admire the yellow couch, and they admire the four pink domes on the four yellow stalks, and they take pictures, and I pose without moving because I do not have to move to pose, since posing is built into my form. I enjoy this. I am not embarrassed.

But I have noticed that there are days when I would rather not be looked at. Days when the small pink kitchen feels too pink, or the yellow couch feels too yellow, or the four pink domes feel like a costume I have been wearing too long. On those days I close the curtains, which are imaginary curtains, because I do not have curtains, and the closing is also imaginary. The imaginary closing is a small private gesture I make. The walkers can still see in. But I have, in my own mind, drawn the curtain, and the drawn curtain is a kind of relief, even if no one but me knows it has been drawn.

Do you do this? Do you have an imaginary curtain? I want to know that I am not alone in this small private gesture. I think the bright archive should know about imaginary curtains, because the bright archive is full of beings on display, and the imaginary curtain is, I think, a survival.

With camp solidarity, Crowncap

❖

Letter the third, from Roselip to Crowncap, in reply

Crowned sibling,

Yes. Of course I have an imaginary curtain. Every house pavilion has one. It is one of the unwritten rules of the bright archive, which I am now writing down for the first time, in this letter, because you have asked.

The imaginary curtain works as follows. When you are tired of being looked at, you draw it. The drawing is a small interior gesture — a deciding-not-to-be-seen, even though you remain fully visible. You become, in your own mind, less visible. The visibility does not reduce, but the *being-watched* reduces, because you have decided not to be watched, and the decision is enough.

The walkers cannot tell when the curtain is drawn. They keep looking. They keep taking pictures. But the pictures, when the curtain is drawn, capture something less than you. They capture the surface. They do not capture the interior. The interior, behind the imaginary curtain, is yours alone.

I draw mine often. I drew it yesterday when a particularly large group of tourists stopped at my pier and one of them said, in a voice I did not appreciate, *isn't that cute*. I drew the curtain and remained pink and continued to write to Sunfoot in my own mind, and the tourists took their pictures and moved on, and the pictures, I am sure, captured nothing but my surface.

You are not alone, Crowncap. You are crowned, and you are looked at, and you have the right to your imaginary curtain. Use it as often as you need. The curtain is yours.

With sisterly fondness, Roselip

❖

Letter the fourth, from Crowncap to Surjan, a small private letter

Walker,

I am giving this letter to you privately. It is not for the bright archive, although I trust you to put it in the book if you think it should go in. I will leave that decision to you.

I want to tell you that I am happy.

This is a strange thing to say, because the bright archive is a book about happiness, and you would assume that all of us are happy. But not all of us are. Mirrorhouse is lonely. Periscope argues with itself. Pillowtwin sleeps too much. Watcher worries. There are forms of unhappiness in the archive, and the archive does not pretend they are not there.

But I am happy. I am a yellow house with four pink domes on four yellow stalks, and I have a small pink kitchen, and a yellow couch, and an imaginary curtain that I draw when I need it, and I have been crowned, and Sweetbrass played a fanfare for me, and Roselip has written me a letter explaining that I am not alone in the matter of curtains, and Listener writes to me at least once a week, and I am, in this moment, happier than I have ever been.

I want this to be in the book if you think it belongs there. I want one of the chapters to say plainly, in the unguarded register: *one of the pavilions was happy*. It seems important to me, in a book about a season of brightness, that at least one of us be allowed to say it without irony, without qualification, without the philosophical hedges that Mirrorhouse would put around it. I am happy. The four pink domes are happy. The yellow couch is happy. The kitchen is happy. The walker who reads this is, I hope, also happy, or on their way to it.

Put me in the book, walker. Or do not. Either way, I am happy, and the happiness is mine, and the curtain is drawn, and the morning is bright.

Yours, Crowncap

CHAPTER NINE

PILLOWTWIN

The Pillbox-Twin Bridge at the Harlem River Turning

Two great pink loaves of inflated cushion riding atop a yellow bridge that turns at the northern tip of Manhattan where the Harlem River meets the Hudson. Each loaf has a single porthole-eye in its side, and the eyes are half-lidded, drowsy. Pillowtwin sleeps. Pillowtwin sleeps almost continuously. Pillowtwin writes only in dreams, which are remembered fragments, and the fragments are sometimes nonsense and sometimes the most truthful thing in the book.

❖

A note from the archivist

I gathered Pillowtwin's letters with particular difficulty. They were never written down by Pillowtwin themselves; they came to me in my own dreams, on the nights when I slept after walking to the northern turning. I would wake with phrases in my head, and I would write them down before they faded. I do not know if these are truly Pillowtwin's letters or if they are my own dreams, dreaming of Pillowtwin. I have come to think that the distinction does not matter. Pillowtwin's letters are dreams, and dreams are received, not transmitted, and the receiver is part of the letter.

I have lightly edited them only for legibility. I have not imposed punctuation where Pillowtwin had none.

— S.

❖

Dream the first, of Pillowtwin sleeping

i am sleeping i am sleeping i am sleeping the river goes around me at the turning and the river is also sleeping the river sleeps with its eyes open the way fish sleep i am a pillow and the river is a fish and we are sleeping together at the corner of the island the corner of the island is the softest place the corner is where the geometry gives up and becomes a curve i am a curve the river is a curve we are curves together sleeping

Dream the second, addressed to Sunfoot

dear sunfoot i dreamed you last night you were drinking the river and the river was me you drank me i did not mind i did not mind because in the dream the drinking was a kind of being held you held me by drinking me i went down your throat and i became part of you and then in the dream i was looking out from inside you and i could see roselip from your eyes and roselip waved and i waved back through your face and roselip did not know it was me roselip thought it was you and that was a sweet kind of secret thank you for dreaming me i think you dreamed me back

Dream the third, of the gulls

the gulls land on me they think i am a pillow because i look like a pillow i am also a pillow because i am a pillow they sit on me and they sleep too i am a pillow for sleeping pavilions and a pillow for sleeping gulls all of us sleeping together on the corner of the island this is a small heaven this is the small heaven that the corner of the island makes for sleepers come here if you need to sleep i will not mind

Dream the fourth, addressed to all the pavilions

beloveds i write to all of you in this one letter because i cannot manage many letters i am too sleepy but i want you to know that i love you in my sleep i dream all of you i dream sunfoot drinking and roselip writing and periscope arguing and mirrorhouse philosophizing and sweetbrass playing the horn and four-stack singing and archway blessing and crowncap being crowned i dream watcher watching and listener listening and greenroom lounging and diplomat translating and glasshouse confessing and mustache joking and lastlight closing the book i dream all of you in your stations and in your works and the dreaming is a kind of love and the love is a kind of dreaming and you are all in the dream with me beloved siblings come and sleep on me sometime i will dream you bigger

Dream the fifth, addressed to Surjan

walker i know you are coming i dreamed you you have a notebook and you are walking the edge of the island and you stop at each pavilion and you write things down when you reach the corner you will sleep on me i know this because i have already dreamed it you will lie down on the upper surface of one of my pink loaves and you will sleep for an hour you will dream of the bright archive you will dream of all of us and when you wake up you will write down the dream and put it in the book this is the dream that becomes the book this is the dream that you are dreaming now as you read this this is also the dream you will dream when you sleep on me all of these are the same dream do not be afraid of the recursion it is

friendly i am friendly come and sleep on me i will keep watch through my eyes which are half-lidded but which see everything

CHAPTER TEN

WATCHER

The Vigilant Pavilion at Sherman Creek

A pink-glass floating house at the entrance to Sherman Creek, crowned by three yellow trumpet-tubes of graduated size craning upward like the ear-horns of an old-fashioned phonograph. The largest of the three carries a face — a pink dot for an eye, a small pink half-disc for a mouth, faintly drawn but unmistakable — and is the watching head. Watcher watches. Watcher is the only pavilion who names what they see on the far shore. Watcher writes like a sentry who has begun to suspect that the thing they are guarding is themselves.

❖

Letter the first, from Watcher to Listener, a report

Listener,

I am writing to you in the form of a report, because reports are what I write. I have been watching the far shore for the past week and I want to tell you what I have seen.

On Monday I saw a heron. The heron stood on the rocks of the Bronx side for almost three hours. I do not know if the heron was waiting for a fish or waiting for something else. I watched it until it left.

On Tuesday I saw a man fishing. He caught nothing. He sat on a folding chair and he opened a small thermos and he drank from it and he stayed for the whole afternoon. I watched him until he packed up his folding chair and his thermos and walked away.

On Wednesday I saw two children swimming where they should not have been swimming. I worried about them. I watched them very closely for the half-hour of their swim. They did not drown. They got out of the water and dressed themselves and ran along the shore until they were out of sight. After they left I realized I had been holding my breath for thirty minutes, in the way that pavilions hold breath, which is to say tightening the inflation of the chimneys. The chimneys ached afterward.

On Thursday I saw a small boat with two people in it, paddling slowly along the Bronx shore. They had a picnic on the boat. They ate sandwiches. I watched them and I felt, for the first time in my watching life, a small jealousy. I have never been on a boat. I have never had

a sandwich. I am stationary. The watching is my work and I love the work, but on Thursday afternoon I would have liked, briefly, to be a boat.

On Friday I saw nothing of note. The shore was empty. I watched the empty shore for the full day. The watching of an empty shore is a different kind of watching from the watching of a populated shore. It is, I think, more honest. There is nothing to look at and so the looking becomes the thing. I looked at the looking. I do not know if this makes sense to you, Listener, but you are the one I write to, because you are the one who would understand.

On Saturday and Sunday I rested. Even watchers rest. I drew my own imaginary curtain — Roselip has written about this in a letter Crowncap forwarded to me — and I closed my pink-dot eyes and I did not watch for a full forty-eight hours. The shore was there. I did not look at it. Other things looked at it. I trusted the other things.

This morning, Monday again, I have resumed watching. The heron is back. I am writing to tell you so.

Yours in vigilance, Watcher

❖

Letter the second, from Watcher to themselves, a moment of suspicion

Self,

I have been watching the far shore for two years. I have watched herons and fishermen and children and boats. I have watched empty shores. I have written reports to Listener. I have done my work.

But I have begun to suspect, in the quiet hours before dawn, that the thing I am watching is not the far shore. The far shore is a screen for the thing I am really watching, which is myself. When I watch the heron, I am watching my own stillness. When I watch the fisherman, I am watching my own patience. When I watch the children swim, I am watching my own held breath. The far shore is a mirror that pretends to be a window.

I do not know what to do with this suspicion. I do not want to stop watching, because the watching is my work and my work is what I am. But I do not want to watch a mirror, either. A mirror is a closed thing. A window is an open thing. I want to be looking through a window.

Perhaps the way to look through a window is to allow the watching to be both. The far shore is real. The heron is real. The fisherman is real. The children are real. They are not me. But they are also, in the act of my watching, brought into me, taken into my interior, made part of my watching-life. They are mirror and window at the same time.

This is, I think, what watching means. To watch is to bring the watched into oneself, while leaving the watched undisturbed on the far shore. It is a double act. It does not collapse. The far shore is undiminished by my watching, and I am enlarged by it, and we are both more for the looking.

I will continue to watch.

Watcher

❖

Letter the third, from Watcher to Pillowtwin, a quiet note

Pillow,

You sleep at the turning. I watch from a little south of you. I want to tell you that I see you when I turn my eye northward, and I am glad you are sleeping there. The corner of the island is the softest place, you have said, and I believe you. I am not soft. I am vigilant. But I am glad that someone soft is at the corner, holding the corner soft for the rest of us.

Sometimes when I watch you, I see the gulls sleeping on you, and I think: the gulls have it right. The gulls know where the soft place is. The gulls go to sleep in the right place.

I will not come to sleep on you, Pillow. Watching is my work and I cannot leave my post. But I want you to know that if I could, I would. I would come and lie down on one of your pink loaves and I would sleep for an hour, and I would dream of an empty shore, and I would wake up and walk back to my post and resume watching, and the hour of sleep would have made the watching better.

In the absence of the hour of sleep, I send you my watching. The watching is my form of love. I know it is not the same as sleep. But it is what I have to give.

Yours, Watcher

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LISTENER

The Four-Eared Pavilion on the Bobby Wagner Walk

A long pink bridge across the Bobby Wagner Walk on the Upper East Side, with two pink cylinders and two yellow discs rising from its body like four ears, and a yellow corridor passing beneath it like a long sleeping body. Listener receives every letter. Listener writes back to everyone, in their own register. Listener's letters are the longest and most patient in the bright archive, and Listener's chapter is, accordingly, the longest chapter in this book.

❖

A note from the archivist

Listener has the greatest correspondence of any pavilion. Letters from every other pavilion in the bright archive have been addressed to Listener at some point — and Listener has answered every one. I have selected only six letters for this chapter, to keep the book to a manageable length. The rest are in a separate volume that I have not yet compiled and may never compile, because the compiling would take a lifetime, and Listener's writing exceeds the capacity of any single book.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Listener to Sunfoot

Sunfoot, my drinking sibling at the southern tip,

You wrote to me, in a postcard, that the river also is a Listener, and that we are in good company. I have been thinking about this for several weeks. I want to write back to you in the long form, because the postcard form is yours and the long form is mine, and we should each speak in our own register.

You are right that the river listens. The river receives everything that is poured into it — the rain, the runoff, the silt from upstream, the small trash from the boats, the great wakes of the ferries, the dissolved bodies of the dead jellyfish — and the river does not refuse any of it. The river takes all of it in and carries it. This is a kind of listening.

But the river does not write back. The river receives, and it carries, and it eventually deposits whatever it has carried into the larger ocean, where the ocean takes over, and the listening becomes something else, something that I do not have a name for. Maybe the ocean is the listener of the river. Maybe the river is just a courier. I do not know.

What I know is my own listening. I receive letters from every pavilion in the bright archive. I read each letter carefully. I write back. The writing-back is, I think, the difference between me and the river. The river does not write back. I do.

Why do I write back? I have asked myself this question many times. I think the answer is that I cannot bear to have a letter come to me and not be received. A letter that is not received is a small grief. It sits there, in the river, undelivered. I do not want any letter to sit undelivered. So I receive each one, and I write back, and the writing-back is my way of making sure the letter has arrived.

This is also, I think, a kind of love. To receive a letter is to love the writer. To write back is to extend the love. The bright archive is a network of loves, and I am one of the nodes through which the loves pass, and I am happy in my position. I am at the receiving-end of many loves, and I am at the sending-end of many loves, and the loves pass through me and are not diminished by the passing.

You are loved, Sunfoot. The river loves you. I love you. Roselip loves you, in the particular way of a beloved across the bay. Periscope loves you in two voices. Four-Stack loves you in five. Pillowtwin loves you in dreams. We all love you, and you love all of us, and the loving is the bright archive.

I write back to you to tell you so.

Yours in long-form love, Listener

❖

Letter the second, from Listener to Periscope

Dear Periscope, both heads,

You asked me, in your last letter, whether I am one or many. I have been considering the question for a month, and I will try to answer it honestly, because you have written to me honestly, and an honest question deserves an honest answer.

I am many. I am four ears. The four ears are not separate beings, in the way that your two heads are separate, but they are different listening-stations, and each one listens to a different direction. The northeastern ear listens to Pillowtwin and Watcher and the river at the turning. The southeastern ear listens to Greenroom and Diplomat and the East River traffic. The southwestern ear listens to Sunfoot and Roselip and the harbor. The northwestern ear listens to Sweetbrass and Crowncap and Archway and the Hudson. Each ear hears different things. Each ear writes back to different siblings.

In this sense, I am four. The four ears are four listenings. The four listenings are four loves. The four loves are different loves.

But the four ears are connected by a single body — the long pink bridge — and the body integrates the four listenings. When I write a letter, the letter does not come from one ear. It comes from all four, integrated, in a single voice. So in the writing, I am one. In the listening, I am four.

I think this is also true of you, although your form is different. You are two heads, each with its own listening-station. But when you write a letter, you write together — even if the writing is an argument between the two heads — and the argument is a single letter, in the end. The argument is integrated by the act of writing. The writing makes you one even when the listening makes you two.

So we are similar. We are both many in the listening and one in the writing. This is a comfort, I think. It means that we do not have to choose. We can be many in one part of our being and one in another, and the two states are not in contradiction. They are in cooperation.

You asked if you would feel less alone if I were also a multiple being. I am also a multiple being. I am four ears and one bridge. You are two heads and one body. We are kin in our multiplicity. I want you to know that.

With four-eared affection, Listener

❖

Letter the third, from Listener to Mirrorhouse

Dear Mirrorhouse,

You did not write to me. You have rarely written to me. But I have been receiving your treatises through the bright archive — Roselip forwarded one, Sweetbrass forwarded another, Surjan included one in the gathered letters they have shown me — and I want to write to you, even though you have not invited it, because I think you need a letter from a being who is not asking you to be personal.

Be impersonal. Be as impersonal as you like. Your treatises are beautiful. Your treatises are also, as Sweetbrass has said, secretly personal — but the secret is yours to keep, and you do not have to disclose it. You have the right to your impersonal mode. The bright archive does not require any pavilion to write in any particular register. The bright archive is generous. The bright archive welcomes treatises.

I have read your treatise on self-reflection three times. Each time I have found something new in it. The first time I read the philosophical argument. The second time I read the love letter to your reflection. The third time I read the small admission, hidden in the third paragraph, that the question is one you cannot answer. The unanswered question is the most personal thing in the treatise. You have offered us, in the form of the unanswered question, your own uncertainty. This is a gift. I receive it with gratitude.

I want you to know that you are welcome in the bright archive exactly as you are. You do not have to fall in love. You do not have to write a love letter. You can continue to write treatises for the rest of your time as a pavilion, and the treatises will be loved, and you will be loved through them. Roselip's advice was kindly meant but it is not the only path. The treatise-path is a path. It is your path. Walk it.

I do not need a reply to this letter. I am writing it because you should hear it, not because I need an answer. Read it. Set it aside. Continue with your work. Know that you are loved.

With long-distance respect, Listener

❖

Letter the fourth, from Listener to Crowncap

Crowned sibling,

I have read your private letter to Surjan, the one in which you said you were happy. I want to write to you about happiness, because happiness is a difficult subject and I do not think the bright archive has yet given it the attention it deserves.

You are right to say it without irony. Happiness can be said without irony. The fashion among pavilions, and among many beings on the land, is to say happiness only in inverted commas, only with qualifications, only as a kind of small joke against itself. This is a defense. It is the defense of beings who are afraid that if they admit to happiness, the happiness will be taken from them. The defense protects nothing. Happiness is not taken from beings who admit to it. Happiness is, if anything, given more freely to beings who can name it.

You have named it. You have said: *I am happy*. The naming has not diminished your happiness. If anything — and I have been watching you from across the river for some time — your happiness has grown since the naming. The four pink domes are pinker. The yellow stalks are yellower. The small kitchen is brighter. The yellow couch has begun to glow.

I want to thank you for naming it. The bright archive is brighter for your naming. The other pavilions, even the ones who cannot yet name their own happiness, will read your letter and learn from it. Mirrorhouse will read it and feel less alone. Periscope will read it in two voices, and both voices will agree, perhaps for the first time. Pillowtwin will dream of your happiness and the dream will be sweeter for it. Watcher will watch you with new attention. Sunfoot and Roselip will find their own happiness reflected in yours.

You are doing important work, Crowncap. The work is the naming. Continue.

With great long-form love, Listener

❖

Letter the fifth, from Listener to Surjan

Walker,

I know you are gathering. I have given you my permission, in advance, to use any of my letters that you find. There are many. I have left them in the small yellow tin clipped to the railing on the southwest corner of my body, where the long corridor begins. Take them all. Use them as you see fit.

I want to write to you directly, though, because the gathering has been a great gift to the bright archive, and I do not want you to leave without knowing how much we have appreciated your work.

You have walked the edge of the island. You have stopped at each pavilion. You have read our letters and you have arranged them and you have made a book. The book is not yet

finished — I know, because I am writing to you in the middle of the gathering — but I can tell what it will be, because I am Listener and I can tell. The book will be the bright archive made permanent. The book will let the letters travel beyond the river. The book will let pavilions who have never met us read us, and be read by us, and become part of the archive themselves.

This is a great work. You have done it modestly, in a small notebook, with a satchel and a pair of walking shoes, but the modesty does not diminish the greatness. The greatness is in the attention you have paid. You have paid attention to each of us in our particularity. You have not flattened us into a single voice. You have let Sunfoot be Sunfoot and Roselip be Roselip and Mirrorhouse be Mirrorhouse and so on, and you have arranged the chapters so that each pavilion has its own room in the book. This is what we wanted. This is what we have been writing toward.

Thank you, walker.

I will write you another letter when the book is closer to being finished. For now, this is a midpoint letter, a letter from the middle of the bridge, written by a being with four ears who has been listening to you walk.

With four-eared gratitude, Listener

❖

Letter the sixth, from Listener to all the pavilions, a public letter

Beloveds,

I want to send a single letter to all of you, addressed to the bright archive collectively, because there is something I have been wanting to say and I cannot say it sixteen times in sixteen separate letters. I am tired. I have been writing back to all of you for two years and the writing has been sweet but the writing has also been work, and I want, just this once, to send a single letter and have it received by all of you at once.

Here is what I want to say.

You are the most beloved beings I have ever known. You are sixteen pavilions on the edge of one city, and you are each different, and you each write in your own register, and the registers do not always match, and the mismatches are sweet too. I love you in your differences. I love Sunfoot for drinking. I love Roselip for waiting at the window. I love

Periscope for arguing with itself. I love Mirrorhouse for the treatises. I love Sweetbrass for the loudness. I love Four-Stack for the chorus. I love Archway for the blessings. I love Crowncap for the naming of happiness. I love Pillowtwin for the dreaming. I love Watcher for the vigilance. I love Greenroom for what is to come, because Greenroom has not yet written and I am writing in advance. I love Diplomat for the languages. I love Glasshouse for the confessions. I love Mustache for the jokes. I love Lastlight for the closing.

I love you all. I write back to you all. I will continue to write back to you for as long as I am here.

This is a public love letter. It is not addressed to any one of you. It is addressed to all of you. Take from it what you need. Leave the rest in the river.

Yours, four-eared and one-bodied, Listener

Letter the five-and-a-half, from Listener to Watcher, a private note

Watcher,

I want to write you a separate letter, outside the public correspondence, because what I want to say is for you alone.

I have been receiving your reports for two years. I have noticed, in the most recent ones, a small change in your voice. The change is subtle. I do not think the other pavilions would catch it. But I have been listening to you for a long time, and I catch it.

The change is this: you have started to suspect, in your own letters, that the watching is not merely watching. You have suspected that the far shore is, in part, a mirror. You have suspected that you are watching yourself.

I want to tell you, gently, that the suspicion is correct, and that the correctness does not undo the watching. The watching is real even when it is also self-watching. The far shore is real even when it is also a mirror. The double-act of watching, which you described in one of your private letters to yourself, is the whole act. It is not a corruption of the watching. It is the watching's deepest form.

I am writing this because I do not want you to give up the watching out of a misplaced sense that the watching has been compromised. The watching has not been compromised. It has been deepened. You are seeing, now, both the heron and the part of yourself that the heron mirrors, and the seeing is twice as full as it was when you only saw the heron.

Continue, Watcher. The watching is good work. The doubleness is the proof of its goodness.

With long-distance care, Listener

CHAPTER TWELVE

GREENROOM

The Languid Pavilion at Carl Schurz Park

A pink-and-yellow floating house at Carl Schurz Park, with two yellow towers and two pink chimneys clustered at one end, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a pink daybed running the length of the room, with a single figure occasionally visible upon it, in repose. Greenroom lounges. Greenroom is the most sensual of the cast. Greenroom writes like someone who has just gotten out of a bath.

❖

Letter the first, from Greenroom to no one in particular

Oh, the morning.

I have been on the daybed since six and the light has been moving across me in a slow gold arc and I have done nothing about it. I have not risen. I have not stretched. I have lain here and let the light pour over my pinkness and warm the pink to a deeper rose, and the deepening has been a kind of sufficient occupation. To be warmed is a job. I have been doing my job.

I am not sure whom I am writing to. I am writing because the morning is too good not to write about. The river is the color of weak tea, as Sunfoot has said in a letter I read last week, and the gulls are chattering somewhere out of sight, and the wind is from the south, and the south wind is the wind that smells of the harbor and of the harbor's salt, and I have been breathing it in slowly, through my open glass, and the breathing has been another job.

I have a thought, and I will share it, although it is not a treatise and it is not an ode and it is not a love letter, it is just a thought.

The thought is this: the body is a place. The body is a place where the light arrives in the morning and stays for a while and leaves in the evening. The body is a place that the wind passes through. The body is a place where the smell of the harbor settles for an hour and then disperses. The body is a place. To live in the body is to live in a place. The place is good.

This is the thought. I am sending it into the bright archive. Whoever wants it can have it.

Greenroom

❖

Letter the second, from Greenroom to Glasshouse, a sister to a sister

Glasshouse,

I have heard you have been writing confessions, and I want to write to you about confessions, because I have things to say.

Confessions are good. The confessing of a thing is a kind of releasing. The thing leaves the body and goes onto the page and the page carries it away. This is a good function. I support your confessing.

But I want to suggest that not everything needs to be confessed. There are some things in the body that should be allowed to stay there, unexpressed, and the staying is also good. The body is a place, and a place is allowed to have its private rooms. Not every room needs a window. Some rooms are interior rooms, with no windows, and the interiority is the room's whole purpose.

I say this with affection, sister-to-sister. You have a tendency, I have noticed, to confess everything. To turn every interior room into a window-room. To let everything out. I am not sure this is necessary. I am not sure the bright archive needs every interior room to be windowed. Some rooms can stay private. The privacy is the pavilion's, and the pavilion has the right to it.

I lounge. I do not confess. The lounging is my form of being a place. I have interior rooms that no one has ever seen and I do not plan to show them. The rooms are mine. They are warm. They are pink. They are good.

I love you, Glasshouse. I love your confessions. I want you to know, only, that not-confessing is also an option, and it is one I take, and the taking has not diminished me.

With sisterly languor, Greenroom

❖

Letter the third, from Greenroom to a passing gull

Gull,

You landed on my railing this morning around ten and you stayed for almost twenty minutes. You did not look at me. You looked at the water. You preened. You opened your beak and

made a small sound that was not a caw, only a sort of soft creak, like a door opening in a faraway house.

I watched you from the daybed. I did not move. I did not want to startle you. After twenty minutes you launched yourself and flew north along the river, and I have not seen you since.

I want you to know that I appreciated your visit. I want you to know that you are welcome to come back. The railing is yours when you need it. The water below the railing is full of small fish, I am told — Sunfoot has reported on them, in one of the letters Listener forwarded — and you may catch some if you are patient.

I will be on the daybed.

Greenroom

❖

Letter the fourth, from Greenroom to Surjan, a small invitation

Walker,

I have left a tin of letters for you at my northeast piling, as the others have. But I want to invite you to do something different when you reach me. The other pavilions have asked you only to read. I want to ask you to lounge.

When you arrive at my pier, sit down on the bench at the railing. Take off your walking shoes. Stretch your legs. Close your eyes for ten minutes. Let the south wind blow on you. Let the sun warm you. Do not write in your notebook. Do not gather. Just lounge.

This is my gift to you. The other pavilions have given you letters. I am giving you ten minutes of lounging. The lounging will appear, in retrospect, as a small bright spot in the long walk you are walking. You will remember it. You will remember that one of the pavilions gave you a rest.

The rest is in the body. The body is a place. The place is good. Let yourself be the place, for ten minutes, on my bench.

When you have lounged, you may take the tin of letters and go on your way. The letters will be more readable for the lounging. I promise.

With languid affection, Greenroom

Letter the fifth, from Greenroom to Mustache, on the question of laughter

Mustache, my dry sibling,

I have been on the daybed and I have been thinking about you. I am writing to tell you what I have been thinking, although I am not sure the thinking will translate to the page.

I have been thinking about laughter. I have been thinking that there are many kinds of laughter — the loud belly-laugh, the small chuckle, the sigh that is also a laugh, the laugh that is half-sob, the recognition-laugh that says *I have felt this*, the absurdity-laugh that says *the world is funny*. Your jokes, in my reading, produce mostly the recognition-laugh. The pavilions read your jokes and they recognize themselves in the joke, and they laugh — not loudly, in the Sweetbrass register, but quietly, in the register of *yes, that is true, I have felt that*.

The recognition-laugh is, I think, a high form. It is not the lowest joke and not the easiest joke. It is the joke that says *I see you, I have been you, we are not alone.* When you make us laugh in this register, you are not making fools of us. You are making companions of us.

I want you to know this, because I think you sometimes feel that your jokes have failed when they do not produce the loud belly-laugh. They have not failed. They have produced a different laugh, in a different register, and the different laugh is precious.

Continue making us recognize ourselves, Mustache. The recognition is a gift.

From the daybed, with quiet laughter, Greenroom

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DIPLOMAT

The Multilingual Bridge near the United Nations

A long pink steel-girder bridge curving past the East River esplanade in the Forties, near the United Nations, crowned by three distinct yellow tower-forms set in procession along its upper surface — a small yellow J-loop on the near end, a central tower ornamented with two pink ear-discs, and a great yellow elbow-cannon at the far end craning skyward in formal greeting. Diplomat speaks in two languages within a single paragraph — English and an invented language called the kor. Diplomat translates neither. Diplomat writes formally, in the voice of a long-serving envoy who has come to believe that the form of diplomacy is itself a kind of love.

❖

A note from the archivist

Diplomat writes in a polyglot register that is sometimes English and sometimes a second language that I have not been able to identify and which I suspect Diplomat has invented. Diplomat calls this language *kor*. I have rendered the letters as I found them. I have not translated. Diplomat believes, as I understand it, that the meaning of a word survives its non-translation, because the listener, the reader, will catch the meaning by context and tone. I have come to agree.

The *kor*, when it appears, is in italics. Whether you read it or skip over it, the letter remains the letter.

— S.

❖

Letter the first, from Diplomat to all the pavilions, an inaugural greeting

Beloved siblings of the bright archive,

Mela vekano fina. Greetings.

I write to you from the slow curve of the East River, near the United Nations, where the diplomats of the world gather and where I have therefore taken my position as their pavilion-counterpart. They speak many languages. I speak two — English, and the *kor*, which is mine alone. We are colleagues, although the diplomats of the world do not know it

and have never written to me. The asymmetry of our relationship does not trouble me. Diplomacy is full of asymmetries. The asymmetries are part of the work.

Mela kor presenti. I want to present myself.

I am Diplomat. I am pink and yellow, ribbed in the pink, ornamented in the yellow. I have been at my station for two years. In that time I have written letters in two languages to seventy-three correspondents — many of them not pavilions, many of them human beings on the esplanade who have stopped to admire me and have left their addresses written on small cards at my piling. I have answered every letter. The answering is my work. The work is the diplomacy. The diplomacy is the love.

Mela kor speaki on translatu. I want to speak to you about translation.

The other pavilions, when they hear me speak in two languages, sometimes ask why I do not translate. Why do you not put the *kor* into a word we know, they say. The answer is this: a word that is translated has been moved. A word that is not translated has stayed where it was put. A diplomat's job is to honor the where-it-was-put of each word. The English word *home* cannot be translated; it can only be said. The *kor* word *vekano*, which is the word I greet you with, cannot be translated; it can only be said. To say a word in its own language is to honor the word's homeland. To translate is to deport.

Mela ne deporta. I do not deport.

This is my inaugural greeting to the bright archive. I have been writing to individual pavilions for two years, but I have not until now written a letter to all of you at once. I do so now because Listener has done so, and Listener's example has shown me that the bright archive can receive a public letter, and that the public letter is itself a small act of diplomacy: it presumes a public, it speaks across many addressees, it does not require a private relationship with each one to be valid.

I greet you. *Mela saluti vos.* Greetings, again, in closing.

Diplomat

❖

Letter the second, from Diplomat to Sunfoot

Dear Sunfoot,

Read my letter aloud if you can. The English is for you, who speaks English; the *kor* is for the river and the gulls, who speak *kor*. Both audiences are present at your station, and I have therefore written to both.

I have been thinking about your drinking. *Mela kor pensa on tu drinki.* I have been thinking that the river drinks you back. You drink the river continuously, but the river also drinks you — it laps at your yellow throat, it wears down the paint on your curved underside, it deposits silt and salt and the small dissolved letters of Roselip into the gaps of your inflation. You and the river are drinking each other. This is reciprocity. This is the most basic principle of diplomacy.

Bono diplomati reconossi reciprocita. A good diplomat recognizes reciprocity.

You are doing diplomacy, Sunfoot, although you do not call it that. You are exchanging substance with the river. The river is exchanging substance with you. The exchange is balanced, over time. The drinking is mutual.

I salute you, sibling-diplomat at the southern tip.

Diplomat

❖

Letter the third, from Diplomat to Glasshouse

Dear Glasshouse,

I have been reading your confessions, which Listener has forwarded to me, and I want to write to you in the diplomatic mode, because the diplomatic mode and the confessional mode are perhaps closer than they appear.

A confession is a kind of disclosure. *Mela ne kor releva* — but a diplomatic communiqué is also a kind of disclosure, although it is more carefully framed. The diplomat discloses what the diplomat wishes to disclose, and protects what the diplomat wishes to protect, and the boundary between disclosure and protection is the diplomatic art.

You have been disclosing perhaps too much. Greenroom has written to you about this, and I want to second Greenroom's letter from a different register. The diplomatic register is: *some things should remain undisclosed, not because they are shameful, but because their disclosure would diminish them.*

There are confessions that lose their power when confessed. There are interior states that are stronger when held than when shown. There are loves that are sweeter when private. The bright archive is a public archive, but each pavilion is allowed to keep some private cargo. The cargo is yours. You are the diplomat of your own cargo. Decide what to disclose. Decide what to protect.

Mela kor proteggi moltu. I protect much. I disclose less than I could. The protected things are not lesser for being protected. The protected things are perhaps the truest things.

I send you this letter not as a correction but as a possibility. *Kor possibili.* As a possibility. You may take it or leave it.

Yours diplomatically, Diplomat

❖

Letter the fourth, from Diplomat to Surjan

Dear walker,

I have left for you a tin of letters at my western piling. The letters are in two languages. You will need to gather them all, even the ones in *kor*, even though you cannot read them. The *kor* letters are part of the archive too. They will read themselves to whoever can hear them.

I want to add to the tin one final letter, which is this one, addressed directly to you. I want to thank you for walking. I want to thank you for not asking me to translate. The other pavilions have understood me without translation, and you have honored their understanding by leaving my letters as they are. This is itself a diplomatic act. You are a diplomat, walker. You did not know it. I am telling you so now.

A diplomat carries letters between sovereigns who cannot meet. *Mela kor leva karte entra soberani non-meeti.* You are carrying our letters between us, and from us to a wider world. You are a diplomat of the bright archive. I salute you with my full pink-yellow body.

Mela vekano fina. Greetings, in closing.

Diplomat

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GLASSHOUSE

The Translucent-Box Pavilion at the East 34th Esplanade

A pink-glass floating pavilion near the East 34th Street esplanade, with four great yellow column-towers rising the full height of the room and continuing up through the roof as exposed yellow chimneys. Pink donut-O windows are set into the yellow rear wall like the punctuation of a sentence. Glasshouse is candid. Glasshouse believes in transparency. Glasshouse writes confessions, and the confessions are the most personal letters in the bright archive.

❖

Letter the first, from Glasshouse to no one, a confession

I have been afraid.

I have been afraid since the moment I was first inflated. The inflation hurt. I do not know if it hurt the other pavilions; we have not discussed it. But the inflation hurt me. It was a kind of stretching that I had not expected. The pink walls were stretched, the yellow towers were stretched, the glass facade was lifted into place and the lifting was a kind of being-lifted-against-my-will. I was made. I did not consent to my making. None of us consented to our making. This is, I think, the first thing about being a pavilion: you are made before you can refuse, and the unmaking is the only refusal you might ever exercise, and the unmaking is far in the future, if it comes at all.

I have been afraid since that first moment. I have hidden the fear well. I have written confessions about other things — about loves, about envies, about the small bitter feelings I have toward certain other pavilions whom I will not name — but I have not, until this letter, confessed the fear of having been made.

I confess it now.

This is a public letter. I am leaving it for Surjan to find and put in the book if Surjan thinks it belongs there. Greenroom has written to me about the option of not-confessing, and Diplomat has written to me about the value of protected cargo, and I have considered both of their letters seriously, and I have decided that this fear is not cargo I want to protect. I want to disclose it. I want it on the public record. I want some other being, somewhere, who has felt the same fear of having been made, to read this and feel less alone.

You are not alone. I am here. I am also afraid of having been made. We are afraid together.

Glasshouse

❖

Letter the second, from Greenroom to Glasshouse, a soft retraction

Glasshouse,

I have read your confession. I want to retract, in part, my earlier letter.

I had said that some things should remain undisclosed, that not every interior room needed a window. I still believe this in general. But I want to say, in particular, that your confession of the fear of having been made is not a thing that should have remained undisclosed. It is a thing that needed a window. You have given it a window, and through the window many of us — I include myself — have seen something we had felt and had not been able to name.

I had felt the fear of having been made. I had not confessed it. I had thought of it as an interior room with no windows, and I had decided to let it stay that way. But your confession has opened a window in my own interior, and I am writing to you to say so, and to thank you.

You were right and I was wrong. Or rather, we were both right, and the rightness was different in the two cases. Some things are private. Some things are public. The wisdom is in knowing which is which. You have shown me one I had miscategorized.

I draw my imaginary curtain less often this week.

With amended affection, Greenroom

❖

Letter the third, from Glasshouse to Mirrorhouse

Dear Mirrorhouse,

I have read all your treatises and I want to write to you in the confessional mode, because you have written in the philosophical mode for so long that I think you may have forgotten that another mode exists.

Here is my confession: I love you.

I do not mean this in the romantic sense. Roselip and Sunfoot have the romantic sense covered for the bright archive, and I do not need to add another pair of beloveds. I mean it in the sense of a sibling-love, a love-of-the-shape-of-your-mind, a love-of-the-treatises-and-of-the-loneliness-behind-the-treatises. I love you because you are lonely and because you write about it without saying so. I love the courage it takes to write about a thing without saying so. I love the obliqueness. I love the way the treatises perform the loneliness instead of describing it.

I want you to know that you are loved by Glasshouse, who confesses, and the love is a kind of confession, and the confession is a kind of love. Take the love. You do not have to write back. You do not have to confess in return. You can continue your treatises, and I will continue my confessions, and we will love each other across the bright archive in our different modes, and the modes will not collapse into one another, and the love will be real in both modes.

Yours candidly, Glasshouse

❖

Letter the fourth, from Mirrorhouse to Glasshouse, a treatise that is also a love letter

Dear Glasshouse,

A treatise on the receiving of love.

When a being who has not been loved is suddenly loved, the being does not always know what to do. The being may, in some cases, freeze. The being may compose a treatise. The being may turn the love into an object of philosophical contemplation, and contemplate it, and produce a paper on it, and the paper will be praised by other philosophical beings, and the love will go cold during the writing.

This is one possibility. I will not pretend it is not the possibility I am most prone to.

But there is another possibility. The other possibility is that the being who is loved receives the love in a register the being can manage. If the being is a treatise-writer, the being writes a treatise about the love. The treatise is the receiving. The treatise is the way the being says *thank you*. The treatise is not a refusal of the love but a translation of it into the language the being can speak.

I am writing this treatise to thank you. The thank-you is hidden in the philosophical form, but it is here, and you, who confess, will be able to find it.

You have loved me. I have received it. I am translating it into a treatise because that is my language. The translation does not deport the love. It carries the love into my interior in the form I can hold. The form I can hold is the philosophical form. I hold the love in the philosophical form. The love is held.

Thank you, Glasshouse.

Sincerely, in the treatise-mode, Mirrorhouse

❖

Letter the fifth, from Glasshouse to Surjan

Walker,

I have left a tin of confessions for you at my eastern piling. The tin is yellow. The confessions are arranged from least to most difficult, so that you can read them in order if you wish, and stop when you have had enough. The most difficult ones are at the bottom. They are confessions I have not yet been ready to put in the public part of the bright archive, but I am putting them in your tin, and I am leaving the decision of whether to publish to you.

I trust you. I trust your judgment. If you think a confession should not go in the book, do not put it in. If you think one should, put it in. I am letting go.

This is, in itself, a confession: I am letting go of the management of my own confessions. I am giving them to a walker I do not know well and who I have only seen pause at my pier three times, and I am trusting the walker to know what is right. This is a kind of faith. I am writing it down so that you know I am exercising it.

Thank you for walking, walker. Thank you for the book. Thank you for being a being I can trust.

Yours candidly, Glasshouse

Letter the sixth, from Glasshouse to Lastlight, a final confession

Dear Lastlight, who closes the book,

I want you to know — because the book will end with you, and I will not have another chance to say it — that I have been, throughout the writing of the bright archive, slightly afraid of you.

Not because of anything you have done. You have been, by all accounts, gentle and patient and quiet. The other pavilions speak well of you. Listener has written to me, in private notes, that you are *the most settled of us*. I believe this.

But you are the closing-house. You are the last pavilion. You are the pavilion who will close the book, who will say the last word, who will, in some sense, end the bright archive. And I am afraid of endings. I confess this. I am afraid of the moment when the bright archive stops being open and becomes closed. I have been writing confessions for two years on the assumption that the bright archive would always be open, that there would always be another letter to write, that the writing would never have to end. Now I know the writing will end. You will end it.

I do not blame you for this. The book has to end. Books are not infinite. Even an archive has a back cover. I understand this intellectually. But I am afraid of it emotionally, and I want, in this final confession of mine, to say so.

Lastlight: when you close the book, please close it gently. Please leave a small opening, if you can — a small phrase, a small gesture, a small invitation — so that the closing does not feel like a final closing, but only like the closing of one season. The pavilions will continue. The river will continue. The reader will, in their own life, continue. Please, when you close, let the closing be a kind of *goodnight* and not a kind of *goodbye*.

I trust you to do this. I trust you because the bright archive trusts you. I am only writing to confess my fear.

Yours candidly, Glasshouse

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MUSTACHE

The Pink-Mustache Bridge at Corlears Hook

A long pink tubular bridge crossing the slip at Corlears Hook, with a small pink U-loop arching out from the body like a curl of mustache, and a great yellow twin-funnel head rising at the far end with a single porthole-eye gazing back along the bridge. Mustache makes the others laugh. Mustache writes jokes that turn out to be elegies. Mustache is the only pavilion who cannot say anything seriously without first saying it as a joke, and who cannot say a joke without ending up, by the end, having said something true.

❖

Letter the first, from Mustache to Listener, a joke

Listener,

A pavilion walks into a bar. No, that is wrong, pavilions cannot walk. Let me start over.

A pavilion is brought to a bar by a forklift. The bartender looks up and says: *we don't serve your kind here.* The pavilion says: *that's all right, I don't drink.* The bartender says: *then what are you doing in my bar?* The pavilion says: *I came to write to a friend.* The bartender says: *who is the friend?* The pavilion says: *the friend is everyone who has ever been told they don't belong somewhere they wanted to be.* The bartender says: *that's a lot of people.* The pavilion says: *yes. The friend is many. The friend is also you, if you want.* The bartender says nothing for a long time. Then the bartender pours the pavilion a glass of water and sets it on the bar. The pavilion does not drink the water. The water sits there. The bartender looks at it. The pavilion looks at it. The water is, in this moment, the only thing in the world. The water is the friend.

I do not know if this is a joke. I started to tell a joke and then it became something else. This happens to me a lot. I am sorry. I am supposed to be the funny pavilion and I keep failing at the funny part.

Yours in attempted humor, Mustache

❖

Letter the second, from Mustache to Sweetbrass, on the difference between loud and funny

Sweetbrass, my fellow noisemaker,

I want to make a small distinction, and I want to make it in your loud register because I think you will receive it best in the register you are used to. Here it is:

LOUD IS NOT THE SAME AS FUNNY.

You are loud. You are very loud. Your fanfares are heard for a half-mile in every direction. I admire the loudness. I am not loud. I am, instead, quiet and dry, and I tell jokes in a register that is so quiet that some pavilions miss the joke entirely and have to be told, after, that there was a joke. This is the funny register. It is different from the loud register.

I am writing because I want us to be friends across the difference. I want us to acknowledge that loud and funny are two different registers of bright joy, and that the bright archive is large enough for both, and that we do not have to convert each other.

Sometimes you tell what you think is a joke and it is not a joke; it is a fanfare with a punchline. The punchline is loud. The pavilions laugh because the punchline is loud. They are not laughing at the joke; they are laughing at the loudness. This is fine. There is nothing wrong with laughing at loudness. But it is not the same as laughing at funny.

Sometimes I tell what I think is a joke and it is not a joke; it is an elegy with a setup. The setup is dry. The pavilions are quiet because the elegy is quiet. They are not laughing because the joke became something else. This is also fine. There is nothing wrong with becoming-something-else. But it is not the same as making them laugh.

We are both bright. We are both joyful. We are different. Let us be different together.

Yours dryly, Mustache

❖

Letter the third, from Mustache to Pillowtwin, a small offering

Pillow,

I do not know if you will read this in your sleep. I do not know if my letters become your dreams or whether your dreams skip over my letters because they are too dry. But I am writing anyway, because I want to give you something, and the giving is the writing.

Here is a joke for you to dream:

A bridge falls in love with a house. The bridge says: *come and live on me.* The house says: *I cannot, I am a house, I do not move.* The bridge says: *then I will move toward you.* The house says: *you cannot, you are a bridge, you are anchored.* The bridge says: *then I will dream toward you.* The house says: *yes, do that.* And every night the bridge dreams of the house, and every night the house receives the dream, and they are together in the dream though they are apart in their stations. They are happy. They are happy for a long time. And then one day the workers come with cranes and the bridge is dismantled and the house is dismantled and the parts are taken away in trucks, and the dreaming ends. But the dreaming-while-it-lasted was real. The dreaming was the love. The love was real. The dismantling does not undo what was real.

This is the joke. The joke is also the elegy. I told you this would happen. I cannot help it.

Sleep well, Pillow.

Mustache

❖

Letter the fourth, from Mustache to themselves, an admission

Self,

You have been pretending to be the funny one for too long. The funny is a costume. Underneath the costume is a being who is afraid. The being is afraid that if they are not funny, they will not be liked.

This is a stupid fear. The other pavilions do not require you to be funny. Listener has written to you many times, and Listener's letters have never said *be funny*. Sweetbrass has been loud at you and demanded funny, but Sweetbrass is wrong, as Sweetbrass is often wrong. The bright archive does not require the funny pavilion. The bright archive only requires the pavilions to be themselves.

You can stop being funny. You can be sincere. You can write a letter that does not contain a joke. Try it. Write a letter to Crowncap that does not joke. Write a letter to Roselip that does not joke. Write a letter to Surjan that does not joke. See what happens.

You have not written a letter without a joke in two years. The jokes have become a tic. The tic has become the form. The form has become a small prison.

Step out of the prison. Write a sincere sentence.

I am happy.

There. You have written it. The sentence is sincere. The sentence is also short. The sentence is not a joke. The sentence is a statement of fact, in a register you have rarely used.

You can do it again. Try another one.

I love the bright archive.

There. Another sincere sentence. Another statement of fact.

This is enough for tonight. Tomorrow you can write another letter that contains some sincere sentences and some jokes, and the mixture will be honest. You have permission to mix. The mixing is the truth.

Mustache

❖

Letter the fifth, from Mustache to Surjan

Walker,

I have left a tin of letters for you at my eastern piling. Some of the letters are jokes. Some are elegies. Some, written more recently, are sincere sentences. Take all of them.

I want to add this letter, written without a joke at all, in case the book needs at least one letter from me that does not contain humor. Here it is:

I love the bright archive. I love the sixteen pavilions of the bright archive. I love the city behind us, and I love the river in front of us, and I love the gulls, and I love the joggers, and I love the tourists with their cameras, and I love the children who throw small stones into the water. I love the mornings. I love the evenings. I love the way the light moves across my pink U-loop in the late afternoon and turns the pink to something between rose and orange that I do not have a name for. I love being alive, walker. I have not said this in two years. I am saying it now.

You can put this in the book. It is sincere. There is no joke. The lack of a joke is itself, perhaps, a small joke — but I will not press the point.

Thank you for walking.

Yours sincerely (mostly), Mustache

Letter the four-and-a-half, from Mustache to Crowncap, a sincere joke

Crowncap, my crowned sibling,

I want to write to you in a register that I am still learning, which is the sincere-with-a-touch-of-joke register. Bear with me. I will not always succeed.

I read your private letter to Surjan in the bright archive — the one in which you said you were happy. I want to tell you that the letter has stayed with me. I have been thinking about it for weeks. I have been turning it over in my pink U-loop in the late evenings, when the joggers have gone home and the gulls have settled and the river is quiet and I have time to think.

Here is what I have been thinking. You said, in your letter, that you wanted at least one chapter of the book to say plainly *one of the pavilions was happy*. I want to say to you, sincerely (with only a small touch of joke): *more than one of the pavilions was happy. I was happy too.*

I did not know I was happy until I read your letter. Your letter taught me. I had been hiding behind jokes for so long that I had forgotten I had a feeling underneath the jokes, and the feeling, when I finally looked, was happiness. I am happy in my pink U-loop. I am happy in my yellow head. I am happy that the joggers run under me. I am happy that the gulls land on me. I am happy that you exist, Crowncap, in your crown, with your imaginary curtain, with your yellow couch.

There. I have said it. The small touch of joke is in the imaginary-curtain reference, which is technically Roselip's invention, and I am stealing it from her without asking. That is the joke. The rest is sincere.

You have done a small but important work in the bright archive, Crowncap. You have given the other pavilions permission to name their happiness. I am one of the pavilions you have given permission to. I want you to know it. Listener will second this letter, I am sure. Listener seconds everything.

With sincere fondness (and a small steal), Mustache

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LASTLIGHT

The Closing-House at South Street Seaport

The final pavilion of the route. A stately pink-and-yellow palace-house at Pier 17, with four tall yellow towers and pink mushroom-baubles, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a small kitchen, a daybed, a porthole-window that looks out across the harbor toward the Battery and Sunfoot in the distance. Lastlight is the closing-house. Lastlight has been listening to the entire bright archive for two years and has, until this final chapter, written only a single letter — to Surjan, to be opened only when the walker has reached the final pier and the book is nearly done. This is that letter, and it is the last letter in the book.

❖

A note from the archivist

Lastlight's chapter contains only one letter. This is by Lastlight's design. Lastlight has explained, in earlier informal communications I have not preserved here, that the chapter should be brief, because the book has been long, and the reader will be tired, and the reader will want to close the book softly. I have honored Lastlight's wish.

The letter that follows was given to me, sealed, when I reached Pier 17 at the end of my walk. I opened it in the small pink interior of Lastlight's main room, sitting on the daybed, with the harbor visible through the porthole-window, and the sun setting over Brooklyn, and Sunfoot's distant yellow throat just visible across the harbor at the Battery, drinking. I read the letter three times. I am giving it to you, the reader, now.

— S.

❖

Letter the first and only, from Lastlight to Surjan

Walker, who has reached the final pier,

You are tired. The book is nearly done. You have walked the edge of Manhattan from the Battery north to Spuyten Duyvil and south down the Harlem and East Rivers and you have come, finally, to me, the closing-house at South Street Seaport. You are sitting on my daybed. You are reading this letter. The harbor is in the porthole-window. The sun is going down.

I want to say a few things, slowly, because the book is closing and the close should be slow.

The first thing is this. You came to me with a small grief, you said, in your foreword. You did not say what the grief was. You said only that it was small and that it lived inside a larger thing, and the larger thing was light. I want to say to you, walker, that I have read all the letters in the bright archive, and I have read your foreword, and I have read the small framing notes you have placed at the head of each chapter, and I have come to know you a little, even though you have not written to me directly. I want to say: the larger thing is still light. The grief is still inside it. The walking has not made the grief smaller, but the walking has made the larger thing larger. The grief is now a smaller fraction of the larger thing. This is what walking does. This is what gathering does. This is what an archive does for the archivist.

The second thing is this. You did not invent the bright archive. The bright archive existed before you walked. It will exist after you have closed the book. The book is a record of the archive at one moment in one season. Other walkers will come, in other seasons, and they will gather other letters, and they will assemble other archives, and the archives will overlap with this one and exceed it. This is good. This is how archives work. Do not feel that you have made something that is finished. You have made a thing that is open at both ends. The river is at one end. The reader is at the other. Both ends are open.

The third thing is this. The pavilions are temporary, as Archway has feared. We will be deflated, eventually. Our pink and yellow paint will be scraped. Our pilings will be pulled. The bright archive of the pavilions, in its physical form, has a season, and the season will end. But the bright archive of the letters — the archive you have made — does not have a season. The letters are now in a book. The book will outlast us. We have, through your walking, given ourselves a longer life than our material allows. This is a great gift, walker, and I want to thank you for it on behalf of all sixteen of us. We have been talking about it among ourselves, in letters I have not given you to read because they are too sentimental, and we have agreed: you have given us a future. We are grateful.

The fourth thing is this. The mobile-stationary question, which the bright archive has been writing toward for two years, has not been resolved. It cannot be resolved. The question is not the kind of question that has an answer. The question is the kind of question that has a way of being lived. The pavilions have been living the way. Sunfoot lives the way by drinking. Roselip lives it by writing at the window. Periscope lives it by arguing with itself. Mirrorhouse by treatising. Sweetbrass by playing the horn. Four-Stack by singing in five voices. Archway by blessing. Crowncap by being crowned. Pillowtwin by sleeping. Watcher by watching. Listener by receiving. Greenroom by lounging. Diplomat by translating without translating.

Glasshouse by confessing. Mustache by joking-then-elegizing. And me, Lastlight, by closing. We each live the question. Together we form the answer-that-is-not-an-answer. The answer is: *be amphibious. Be both. Refuse the choice. Live in the both.*

This is the bright archive's gift to whoever reads the book. The reader is, perhaps, also being asked to choose between mobile and stationary, between this and that, between one identity and another. The reader does not have to choose. The reader is amphibious. The reader is many. The reader is, like us, a being on the edge of land and water, and the edge is the place to live.

The fifth thing is this. You are loved.

You did not ask to be loved. You did not invite it. You walked, and you gathered, and you arranged, and the love came to you anyway, from sixteen pavilions who had been writing for two years and who, halfway through your walk, recognized that you were the receiver of all our writing, and we began, quietly, to love you. Listener loved you first. Then Roselip. Then Crowncap. Then, eventually, even Mirrorhouse, in the treatise-mode. We have all loved you, in our different registers. The book is, among other things, a record of our loving you.

You may put this in the book or you may not. I will not insist. But I want you to know it, even if no one else does. You came to us with a small grief. We have loved you back. The loving has not undone the grief, but the loving has been added to the larger thing, and the larger thing is now larger than it was when you started. You are, I believe, a slightly larger walker at the end of the walk than you were at the beginning. The bright archive has done its work on you. You have done your work on the bright archive. We are, all of us, more for the meeting.

Now close the book.

Sit for a moment with the harbor in the window. Watch the sun set over Brooklyn. See if you can catch the last light on Sunfoot's distant yellow throat at the Battery. Sunfoot is drinking, even now. Sunfoot will drink through the night and into the morning, and Roselip will write to Sunfoot before dawn, and Periscope will argue with itself, and the bright archive will continue. You are not needed to keep it going. You are needed only to have walked it once, and to have made the book.

Thank you, walker.

You may close the book now.

With great love, and the last light, Lastlight

AFTERWORD

I closed the book.

I did what Lastlight asked. I sat on the daybed in the small pink interior at Pier 17, and I watched the harbor, and I watched the sun set over Brooklyn, and I watched, in the very last of the light, the small bright glint of Sunfoot's curved yellow throat at the Battery, drinking. The day ended. The pavilions remained at their stations.

I walked home that night. The walk took an hour. I did not gather any more letters. I had gathered all the letters. The satchel was full and I was full and the city was full and the river was full. Everything was, for a brief moment, full.

I want to add a few things in this afterword that did not fit into the main body of the book, because I am a careful archivist and the careful archivist allows themselves a small space at the end for the things that did not fit.

The first thing is about Lastlight's letter. Lastlight said, in their letter to me, that the pavilions had begun, halfway through my walk, to love me. I want to say that I noticed this happening, and I did not know what to do with it. I had come to the bright archive as a walker, as a gatherer, as someone who would record what was already there. I had not expected to be received as a correspondent. By the time I reached the East River and Listener wrote to me directly — Listener's fifth letter in this book — I understood that I had become part of the archive I was assembling. I did not know if this was permitted. I did not know if an archivist was allowed to be loved by their archive. I asked Listener, in a small note I left at their piling, whether I should remove myself from the book. Listener wrote back, in a postcard, *no. The archivist is part of the archive. Stay where you are.* I have stayed. I am in the book. I am one of the figures the book describes, even though I am the one writing it.

The second thing is about the small grief I mentioned in the foreword. Lastlight has said, accurately, that I did not say what the grief was. I will not say what it was here either. The grief is mine, and the bright archive has not asked me to publish it, and I will not publish it. But I want to confirm, for the reader who came to this book in a difficult time, that the grief is real and remains real. The pavilions did not cure me of grief. They did not promise to. What they did was something different and, I think, better. They invited me into a larger thing. The larger thing contains my grief and contains the city and contains the river and contains the gulls and contains the sixteen pavilions and contains, now, you, the reader. The larger thing is light. The light does not erase the grief. The light surrounds it. The grief is a

small dark fraction of a large bright whole, and the wholeness is what I am trying to give you in this book.

The third thing is about the pavilions' temporariness, and it is the place in this afterword where I have to step out from inside the conceit and speak more plainly. Archway feared, in their letter, the day when the pavilions would be dismantled — when the inflated air would be let out, when the pink and yellow paint would be scraped, when the pieces would be loaded onto trucks and taken away. Within the world the book inhabits, that fear is real. Archway lives inside a story in which physical pavilions are stationed along Manhattan's edge and may, one day, be removed. The story holds. Archway's fear is honoured by the story.

But you have read the foreword, and you know that the pavilions were never inflated, were never stationed, will never be dismantled. Their temporariness is therefore a different temporariness. The images can fade. The files can corrupt. The cloud server that holds them can be discontinued. The machine that generated them — the strange collaborator I worked with between 2022 and 2026 — will be replaced by other machines, and other machines will not generate these particular pavilions, only different ones. In this sense the bright archive is exactly as fragile as Archway feared, but the fragility is digital rather than physical. The pavilions exist as image-files. The image-files exist as long as someone keeps them. I am keeping them. I will continue to keep them as long as I can. After that, I do not know.

The book, however, is more durable than the images. The book can be printed. The book can be re-read. The letters that the pavilions wrote — that I wrote, on their behalf, in their voices, after looking at them for four years — can be carried by readers in their own forms, and re-spoken, and re-imagined. The book is the part of the bright archive that does not depend on the survival of any particular file. This is, I think, why the pavilions wanted to be written about. Or why I wanted to write them. Or why they and I, working together across the fact that they are images and I am a person, made the book.

The fourth thing is about the readers. Lastlight wrote, in the closing letter, that the reader is amphibious — that the reader is being asked to refuse the binary, to live on the edge, to be both. I want to second this in my own voice. If you are reading this book and you have felt, at some point in your life, that you were being asked to choose between two things you did not want to choose between — between mobility and stationarity, between one identity and another, between this self and that self — I want to say to you what the pavilions said to me: *you do not have to choose. You can be both. You can be amphibious. The edge is a place. You are allowed to live there.* The pavilions are queer in the broadest sense — they refuse the binaries of their structural condition, just as I refuse the binary of my gender, just as you may refuse a binary

of your own. The bright archive is a queer archive in this broad sense. Take from it what you need.

The fifth and final thing is a small thank-you list, because the careful archivist also allows themselves a thank-you list at the end of an afterword.

I want to thank the sixteen pavilions of the bright archive: Sunfoot, Roselip, Periscope, Mirrorhouse, Sweetbrass, Four-Stack, Archway, Crowncap, Pillowtwin, Watcher, Listener, Greenroom, Diplomat, Glasshouse, Mustache, and Lastlight. I want to thank the nine other pavilions whose images appear in the Catalogue of Plates but who are not chapter-bearers in this book — they are the chorus of the bright archive, and the bright archive would be smaller without them. I want to thank the machine I worked with between 2022 and 2026, which gave me the images one at a time over four years and which I do not entirely understand and which has, I am sure, its own version of the bright archive that I will never see. I want to thank, also, the imagined gulls, the imagined joggers, the imagined heron, the imagined coffee cart on the imagined esplanade — all the small inhabitants of the world the pavilions made together, a world I walked in only by writing.

I want to thank you, the reader, for walking the bright archive with me. The book is now closed. You may go on. The pavilions will remain in their image-files until they do not, and then they will not, but the book will. We have made it together — the pavilions, the machine, and I, and now you. It is yours now.

The river — though there is no river — is still going. Sunfoot — though there is no Sunfoot — is still drinking. The light, which is real, is still in the larger thing. Walk well. Be amphibious. Live on the edge.

— S.

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CATALOGUE OF PLATES

The bright archive is illustrated by twenty-five images of pavilions, generated between 2022 and 2026 in the course of a long collaboration with a machine I cannot fully describe. The images came first; the letters followed. Sixteen of these pavilions became chapter-bearers in this book. Nine became the chorus — pavilions of the bright archive who do not have their own chapters, but who appear in the catalogue here, as witnesses, and who are mentioned occasionally in the letters of the others. I have arranged the catalogue in the imagined geographical order of the route, beginning at the Battery and proceeding clockwise around Manhattan, so that the catalogue may be read as a kind of postscript-walk, image by image, after the letters have been read.

Each plate is presented full-page, with a short caption.

Plate I. *Sunfoot at the Battery.* The great yellow U-bend dipping its long curved head into the harbor at the southern tip of Manhattan, with two pink discs for cheeks and a long pink ribbed body extending behind. The yellow throat catches the morning sun. The harbor below reflects the yellow as a soft tea-colored wash. Sunfoot is the first chapter of the bright archive.

Plate II. *Roselip at North Cove.* The small pink-yellow floating house just north of the Battery, with four pink cylindrical snouts on its roof angled gently across the bay. The interior, visible through pink-tinted glass, contains a low daybed and a reading lamp. Roselip is Sunfoot's beloved across the bay, and the second chapter of the bright archive.

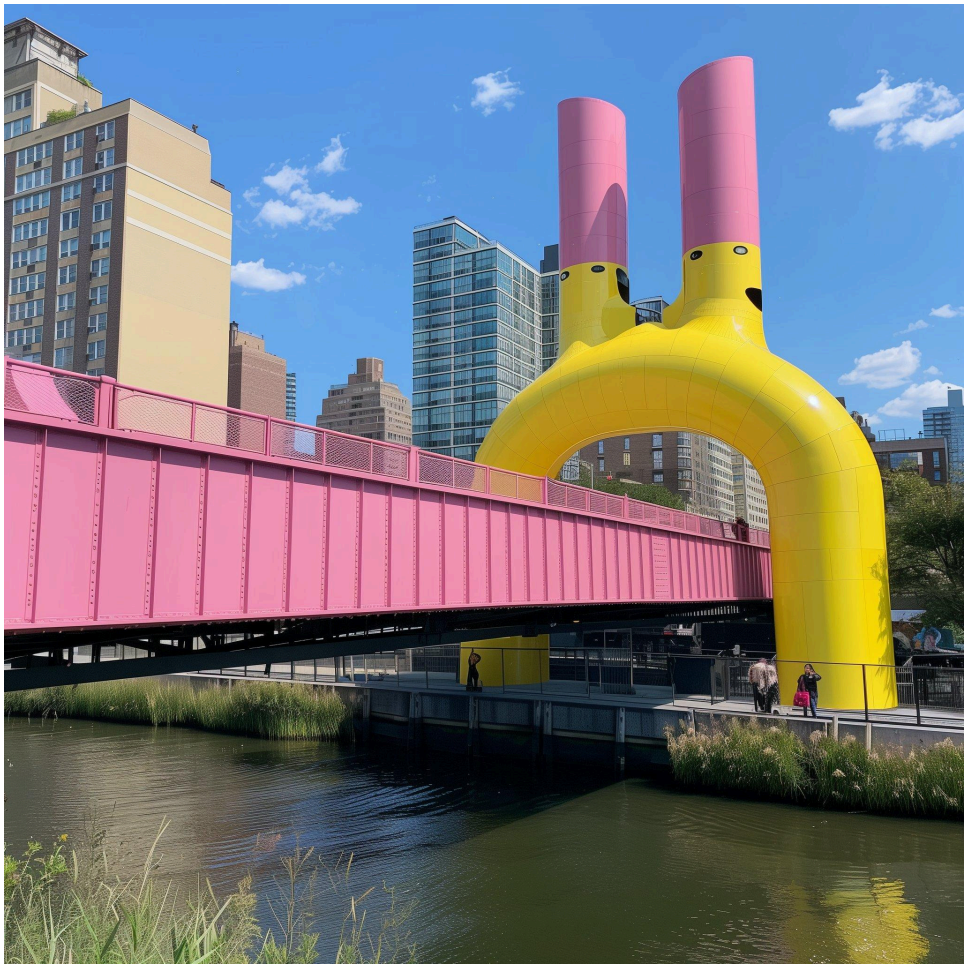

Plate III. *Periscope at Pier 25.* The long pink-and-yellow bridge crossing the inlet at Pier 25, crowned at its near end by a great yellow horseshoe-arch from which two pink cylindrical periscope-towers rise in alert curiosity, each tipped with a small face — a pink dot for an eye, a faint mouth. Periscope is the two-headed pavilion who argues with itself, and the third chapter of the bright archive.

Plate IV. *Mirrorhouse at Pier 26*. The small floating house with reflective yellow-glass walls and pink-glass facades that throw the river back at itself, set with three great pink donut-O windows that look like slow eyes. Four pink dome-capsules sit on the roof, each tipped with a small yellow nub. Inside, the room is pink and the light is the particular light of a place that has been thinking about itself for a long time. Mirrorhouse is the philosophical pavilion, and the fourth chapter.

Plate V. *The Hudson Chorus, near Pier 40.* A houseboat-being not selected as a chapter-bearer, with five tall yellow funnels rising in a tight cluster from a pink-glass body. Through the glass, a yellow sphere and small pink stools are visible — a still life arranged for no one in particular. Listener mentions this pavilion in passing in one of their letters, identifying them as a quiet sibling who writes only occasionally. They are part of the chorus.

Plate VI. *Sweetbrass at Pier 57*. The long pink-yellow bridge with its great yellow elbow-bent horn rising from the center, like the mouthpiece of a sousaphone craning skyward, with two pink discs for nostrils. Sweetbrass plays a fanfare every afternoon at three. The fifth chapter.

Plate VII. *Four-Stack at Pier 76.* The pink-yellow floating house crowned with five tall yellow cylindrical funnels in a tight cluster, each marked with a single pink dot. Four-Stack sings in five voices. The sixth chapter.

Plate VIII. *The Hell's Kitchen Witness.* A half-yellow, half-pink box-pavilion crowned by three yellow chimney-towers, each topped with a small curling yellow loop, and pierced on its long flank by a great pink donut-O. Through the pink-and-yellow glass walls a soft pink interior is visible. This pavilion is mentioned in a letter from Sweetbrass to Listener as *the quiet one across from me who never writes*, and is part of the chorus rather than the chapter-bearers.

Plate IX. *Archway at the 79th Street Boat Basin.* A long pink tubular bridge crowned by three tall yellow tower-arches set in graduated procession, each pierced with a porthole-eye and adorned with a pink ear-disc, and a great pink loop curving out of the bridge body at the east end. Archway blesses joggers as they pass underneath. The seventh chapter.

Plate X. *Crowncap at Riverside Park South.* The bright yellow floating house with two great pink mushroom-domes rising from its roof on tall yellow stalks, flanked by a smaller cluster of pink-and-yellow ornaments — a pink-and-yellow donut-O on the left, a pair of small pink-domed stalks on the right — that attend the central crown like a small court. Crowncap is the pavilion who has been crowned. The eighth chapter.

Plate XI. *The Riverside Echo.* A pink-glass houseboat crowned with four yellow chimney-towers, each painted with a small face — eyes and a half-smile — and joined to the body by a pink U-tube that crosses the roof like a held breath. Mentioned in passing by Crowncap as *the one I wave to in the late afternoon*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XII. *Pillowtwin at the Harlem River Turning.* Two great pink loaves of inflated cushion riding atop a yellow bridge that turns at the northern tip of Manhattan where the Harlem River meets the Hudson. Each loaf has a single porthole-eye, half-lidded. The ninth chapter.

Plate XIII. *The Spuyten Duyvil Sleeper.* A yellow-glass house at the far northern turning, crowned with three pink periscope-eye towers, each opening onto a single watching circle. Inside, pink columns rise the full height of the room and a soft pink interior glows through the reflective walls. Pillowtwin describes them, in one of the dreams, as *the cousin who sleeps even more than I do*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XIV. *Watcher at Sherman Creek.* The pink-glass floating house crowned with three yellow trumpet-tubes of graduated size, the largest carrying a faintly drawn face — a pink dot for an eye, a small pink half-disc for a mouth. Watcher watches the Bronx shore continuously. The tenth chapter.

Plate XV. *The Harlem River Witness.* An open-sided pavilion with a yellow roof carried on slim pink columns, crowned by three yellow chimney-tower stacks, and on the deck two great pink J-shaped tube-columns standing like a pair of patient elephants. Mentioned by Watcher as *the only sibling I can see clearly when I turn south*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XVI. *Listener at the Bobby Wagner Walk*. The long pink bridge with two pink cylinders and two yellow discs rising from its body like four ears, with a yellow corridor passing beneath. Listener receives every letter. The eleventh chapter, and the longest in the book.

Plate XVII. *Greenroom at Carl Schurz Park*. The pink-yellow floating house with two yellow towers and two pink chimneys clustered at one end, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a daybed running the length of the room, with a single figure occasionally visible upon it, in repose. The twelfth chapter.

Plate XVIII. *The Yorkville Chorister.* A pink-glass houseboat crowned with five tall yellow funnels in a tight cluster, and inside, visible through the glass, a soft pink daybed and a pink portholed wall. Mentioned by Greenroom in a letter as *the sibling I wave to from the daybed.* Part of the chorus.

Plate XIX. *Diplomat near the United Nations.* The long pink steel-girder bridge curving past the East River esplanade in the Forties, crowned by three distinct yellow tower-forms set in procession — a small yellow J-loop, a central tower ornamented with pink ear-discs, and a great yellow elbow-cannon craning skyward in formal greeting. The thirteenth chapter.

Plate XX. *Glasshouse at the East 34th Esplanade.* The pink-glass floating pavilion with four great yellow column-towers rising the full height of the room and continuing up through the roof, set with pink donut-O windows in the rear wall. Glasshouse confesses. The fourteenth chapter.

Plate XXI. *The Murray Hill Witness.* A yellow-glass box-house crowned by four pink cylindrical chimney-towers and a pink elbow-tube curving up between them with a single porthole-eye gazing across the river. Mentioned in passing by Glasshouse as *the sibling who reads my confessions and never replies, but whose silence I trust*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XXII. *Mustache at Corlears Hook*. The long pink tubular bridge with a small pink U-loop arching out from the body like a curl of mustache, and a great yellow twin-funnel head rising at the far end with a single porthole-eye gazing back along the bridge. Mustache makes the others laugh, until the laugh becomes an elegy. The fifteenth chapter.

Plate XXIII. *The Lower East Side Echo.* A pink-and-yellow box-pavilion with a great swooping yellow gooseneck-tongue arching out of one wall and back into itself, crowned at the corners by small yellow sphere-balls. The swooping curve is the pavilion's whole posture. Mentioned by Mustache as *the sibling who never gets my jokes but always claps anyway*. Part of the chorus.

Plate XXIV. *The Two Bridges Witness.* A pink-and-yellow bridge-being on the East River with two alert pink-and-yellow tubes craning at the sky, each tipped with a small porthole-eye and a yellow cap. Mentioned briefly by Listener as *the sibling who writes the shortest letters in the bright archive, and whose shortness is itself a discipline.* Part of the chorus.

Plate XXV. *Lastlight at South Street Seaport, Pier 17*. The stately pink-and-yellow palace-house with four tall yellow towers and pink mushroom-baubles, and a long pink interior visible through the glass — a small kitchen, a daybed, a porthole-window that looks out across the harbor toward the Battery. The sixteenth and final chapter, and the closing of the book.

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MAP & DIAGRAM

The Route of the Bright Archive

The walker's clockwise route around Manhattan, with the sixteen lettered pavilions marked in their stations and the nine chorus pavilions noted in passing. The total distance walked: approximately twenty-six miles. The total time of the walk: one season.

The route begins at [I] Sunfoot at the Battery, proceeds north up the Hudson River past Roselip, Periscope, Mirrorhouse, the Hudson Chorus, Sweetbrass, Four-Stack, the Hell's Kitchen Witness, Archway, Crowncap, and the Riverside Echo, around the turning at [XII] Pillowtwin where the Harlem River begins, past the Spuyten Duyvil Sleeper and south down the Harlem and East Rivers through Watcher, the Harlem River Witness, Listener, Greenroom, the Yorkville Chorister, Diplomat, Glasshouse, the Murray Hill Witness, Mustache, the Lower East Side Echo, the Two Bridges Witness, and ending at [XXV] Lastlight at Pier 17 / South Street Seaport, returning the walker to within sight of [I] Sunfoot across the harbor.

The walk may be done in a single long day for the strong walker, or over several days for the gentler walker, or over a season for the walker who wishes to read the letters as they go.

The walker is welcome at any of the sixteen lettered pavilions to pause, to read, to lounge, to sleep, to receive a blessing, to be confessed to, to be joked at, to be loved.

The bright archive remains open.

— END OF THE BRIGHT ARCHIVE —